

Where is my mind by lemonlovely

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Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington's Parents, Will Byers

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Summary:

The day the gate is closed, Steve Harrington passes out from a head injury.

Two days after the gate is closed, Steve Harrington wakes up in the hospital with almost no memory.

Steve Harrington doesn't know who the fuck these people are.

But there's one face that Steve Harrington knows, even if he can't remember the boy's name - and he's convinced that it's the face of his best friend.

They tell him his name is Billy.

And Billy doesn't have the heart to tell him the truth.

Not when Harrington looks at him like that with those big doe-eyes, and says 'We're best friends...aren't we?'

1. With your feet in the air and your head on the ground.

Author's Note:

Pixies - Where is my mind?

Notes for the Chapter:

Day 1

It was raining. Of course it was raining. The sleet-like, November rain was strumming against the roof of Steve's Beamer, loud enough that it was drilling in Steve's ears, insistent-like, and it almost sounded like bees. Bees buzzing in his brain, furious, angry little winged fuckers that were trying to get out of the confines of his head – pounding against his skull like it was their stupid hive or something. A hive they were bailing on. The Mind-flayer had a hive-mind. He'd learned that today.

He had a headache to end all headaches. Jesus Christ his head hurt.

His actual brain seemed to pound with each heartbeat, each desperate thrash of the brain bees. Why the fuck were there bees in the car again? Brain bees? Rain. No, the rain. It was raining. That was right. Why was it raining?

Steve gripped the steering wheel tighter, trying to focus on the road in front of him, twisting his fingers tight around the vinyl. Feeling it slip a little, watching the wet reflective asphalt and yellow double lines waver in front of him like something was moving.

Was it the car? He almost couldn't see through the sheets of rain.

He'd just dropped off Dustin, the last kid he had to deliver home, and now he just had to get *himself* home. That shouldn't be so hard, right? After all, they'd won. They'd gotten past those demon-ass fucker demo-dogs, they'd lit the maze of tunnels on fire, watched that shithole *burn*, sealed up the gate like a poor opening in a defensive play.

Once they'd gotten out of Billy's Camaro, once they were underground, once that rot and reek of The Upside Down was burning in Steve's nostrils, noxious like gasoline fumes and death, Steve's adrenaline had been carrying him. It had carried him over the squelching, shifting vines, to the heart of the maze, the hub, trying to breathe through a bandana over his face.

Band-Aids criss-crossing his face, a rainbow one stuck to his jaw.

Bits of ash floating in the air, upchucked like some kinda pollen from those bizarre pods.

Well really, he supposed that the adrenaline rush had started in the car itself, as he was screaming and begging and demanding as a psychotic thirteen year old drove them to hell at speeds like she was a true Hargrove, not just a Mayfield.

Then he was remembering that he'd promised to keep those little shitheads safe, 'cause he'd get the blame if they died. And okay so he was starting to like them. A little. Warming up to them, at least. Mostly Dustin. Steve was a damned good babysitter. It had kept him focused, keeping the kids alive, keeping Dustin on his feet, and Mike, along with the task of drenching the vine coated walls and floors of the carved out tunnels with gasoline.

Watching his Zippo *FLY*.

Feeling the heat on his face as that shit lit the fuck up like the Fourth of July, the vines twisting and thrashing around like some kind of demented tentacles of possessed octopii lit on fire.

Dark against the light.

That had kept him awake. Kept him present. Kept him there. Energy and the need to survive pounding through his veins, thrumming in his heart, powering his limbs and making him feel like a fuckin' rockstar. Like he could do *anything*.

Swinging his bat at some of the vines that survived the spread of flames, and almost having a heart attack over Dustin's stupid demo-dog - the one that ate his CAT. Feeding him freakin' nougat like a pet, like some kind of demogorgon whisperer.

Bodily lifting the kids one by one up above the tunnels like he was superman or some shit, until only he and Dustin were left, and he had his bat up, a last defense.

The demented, four-leaf flower faced dogs were coming and oh shit, shit, they were gonna die, they were gonna *DIE* like *REALLY DIE* – but then they just kept streaming past, a river of death creatures around them, parting like the red sea around Steve and Dustin's bodies like they were inconvenient boulders – going someplace more important.

Called to the gate.

And Steve and the little shitheads he'd been in charge of hadn't died. They were all still breathing.

And Steve could forget for a while longer how much his head hurt, and how everything seemed not quite real, though he didn't know if that was some kind of shock or not, or if it was from the blood he could feel leaking across his scalp. His face a grisly, lurid art piece of red and purple violence by Billy Hargrove. That warm, thick blood dripping down the edges of his neck, hidden behind his ears.

Out of sight and out of mind. Until now.

Because *now*, alone in the darkness of his car, with only the too-bright glow of his dash lights and the brain bees rattling, or was it the rain on the roof, everything wavered like a mirage in the desert. Like, like you know, like you saw in the movies – all shimmery and sorta pretty, all bright rain and those yellow double lines on the road that seemed to constantly be moving left and right.

They shouldn't be moving like that, he thought, but he wasn't that sure. Things were a little fuzzy. He felt exhausted from the burn-out of adrenaline, so tired he could hardly think straight.

His head pounded fiercely, centered around where a heavy, ceramic plate broke over it, and where he was sure his fucking nose was broken, and his tongue was numb, mouth full of dry cotton.

Finally, FINALLY, Steve saw the lights of his house up ahead, and he thanked any god that was out there that he'd made it there without

wrapping his car around a tree— even if he didn’t believe in that sort of thing. His family wasn’t particularly religious. Never had been. He pulled the Beamer up in the long driveway, and sat there for a moment, watching the swish, swish, swish of the wipers over his windshield, to and fro, back and forth, like the pendulum of a hypnotization.

It made him dizzy. Fuck. Dizzi-*ER*. He needed to get inside. It was fine. He was fine. Just a little out of it, that’s all.

Steve pulled the key from the ignition, and the car fell dark and silent. Steve needed to get the bat out of the trunk of his car, because there was no way in hell he was going without it tonight. Not after what had just happened. No, he had barely been sleeping without it under his bed before, and there was no way he was going to now – he didn’t think he would for a long time.

Maybe ever.

Steve opened the door and started to climb out, and the second he stood up all the way, the blood rushed from his head, blood pressure shifting with the sudden change in body elevation, and he swayed, snatching at the edge of the door for something to grab onto.

The driveway cement was slick under his sneakers, and he tried to set his feet as the rain pounded down on top of his head. Steve was soaked through in less than a second, even with his Members Only jacket on, his hair plastered to his scalp with icy rainwater mixed with blood. Streaming down his face as he lurched, once, and then his sneakers were slipping, and he still had one hand on the door, but the door shifted, moved with his weight. Steve jerked forward, and it was like when you slipped on ice – it was so sudden that he lost his balance, and he immediately pitched forward, smacking the front of his head on the sharp corner of the door – right above where Billy had head-butted him, and a little to the right of his forehead.

The next thing Steve knew, he was flat on his back on the water-thick cement, blinking rapidly, droplets clinging to his eyelashes, staring up into the rain pouring down above him. It assaulted his face like he was in a strong shower, the raindrops sharp as needles on his skin. It was a November rain, so it was more like sleet – half rain, half snow, and it fucking *STUNG*.

How long had he been lying there? He didn't know. The sleet-rain had him chilled, though. He shivered with the cold, giddily thinking 'he likes it cold'. Steve squirmed on his back, and everything pitched drunkenly around him as he tried to sit, his hands sliding from under him. His back smacked the concrete again, the rainy world all hazy-like – the car was beeping at him, beep, beep, beep, incessant with the door hanging open.

BEEP BEEP BEEP. GET THE FUCK UP STEVE, BEEP BEEP BEEP. YOU FUCKING IDIOT, BEEP BEEP BEEP.

Steve grunted, "Yeah, I, I...hear you..."

'*You're an idiot, Steve Harrington,*' he thought he heard.

"Nance...?"

Trying to sit again, and he reached out to grab at the door, using it as leverage to pull himself up with both hands, hanging onto it as a lifeline. There was no one there. No Nance. Nobody. If things had been only a little fuzzy before, they were seriously fucked up now.

"*Shit...euh...*"

Steve barely managed to close the car door.

Staggering up the drive towards where he knew his front door was, based on the wavering porch light, dancing around in his vision – but it was weird because maybe he saw two of them. Two porch lights, flickering like candle flames in a strong breeze, perfectly alike, side by side.

Steve hoped he was heading towards the right light.

When he hit the front door, gasping and desperate for air, palms flat as they smacked against the wet, painted wood, he leaned his forehead against it. Practically kissing it. Hissing as it brought more pain, another wave of dizziness. There was something hot and thick, like warm pancake syrup in his face, and his face fucking HURT, it all hurt. His face was like hamburger helper or something, and his skull was splitting open and the world wouldn't stay straight.

He was on the old carousel set at Ashway Park, he thought, the one

he and Tommy had played on as kids, when he'd spun and spun and spun until he'd been so dizzy he'd thrown up once.
Tommy had laughed and laughed.

Jesus, don't throw up, he told himself, but his stomach objected heartily, and his knees felt weak and he didn't know if he could keep himself up. When he tried to open his raccoon-bruised eyes, there were dark spots, and he had to try three or four times, he couldn't really count, or remember, to get the house key in the door lock. His fingers were shaking too badly with cold and nerves, and he nearly dropped the keys.

Finally open to him, he staggered and stumbled in, dripping pink hued rainwater all over the entryway tile. He didn't even remember to take his shoes off, even though it was a steadfast house rule --his mom would kill him if he forgot, but he couldn't seem to remember how to do that.

His mom. *His mom could help.*

He couldn't remember what was happening. Why was he wet? Rain pounded down on the roof above. There were brain bees, drowning out everything, buzzing, buzzing, buzzing over his rapid, rabbiting heartbeat in his ears – thrumming and panicked and overpowering all else.

There was a shock of lightning outside the windows, and a deafening roll of thunder shook the house as a response, shivering in his bones. Steve gave a cry and stumbled against the wall by the entry, forgetting to close the door – leaving it open on its hinges, wind and rain blowing in behind him.

“Mom!?” Steve called, and it sounded muted to his ears – like he had stuffed cotton into them. The word echoed back at him. “M-mom...” Steve mumbled.

But the house was dark in front of him, so dark, and he didn't know where the light switch was. Where was it?

Steve let out a snuffling sigh, and everything was suddenly scary and dark and he wanted his mom. But it was dark. Empty. And he was alone. The world was that much scarier, because there were monsters

out there, real ones, and he had seen them, and fought them, and tonight, tonight he'd almost died. They'd all almost died. He'd held a nail spiked bat in his hands and prayed. Though he didn't believe. He'd prayed.

What the fuck was happening to him? Jesus he hurt and everything was bending and leaning, careening like the tilt o'whirl at the carnival or the carousel in the park and spots danced in front of his vision, while his bruise darkened eyes didn't even want to open all the way.

"*Mom...Mom....dad...*" Steve whispered, voice hoarse, talking to no one but ghosts.

He was still walking forward into the cavernous empty house, at least he *thought* so, and he could see the dark silhouette of the stairs, where he knew they should be, and he was reaching out toward the banister. Sure he could reach it.

He did. He made it.

He grabbed on, trying to lift a wet Cortez Nike to the next step. Hadn't he taken his shoes off? His mom would kill him, he thought blearily as he looked stupidly down at his sneaker. Tracking rain water, mud, and dots of blood behind him on his mother's perfect carpet.

His center of balance shifted as he lifted a foot, and suddenly his stomach was rising up and Steve was leaning forward, hanging onto the banister for dear life, and he was throwing up on the steps, but he didn't even remember what he'd eaten last, he thought it was mostly the fruit punch Gatorade he'd chugged earlier. But he couldn't be sure.

Steve careened backwards, and he vaguely felt his back impact against something, heard something give a wet '*thump*' but it had seemed like he was falling sideways, not down. Everything was dark, the frigid November wind from outside brushing over his face, soothing, soothing, whispering for him to sleep, sleep, everything was okay, just sleep.

He was gasping for breath, like it'd been knocked from his lungs. The carpet around him darkening in a slow-spreading water stain.

He heard the door knocking against the wall.

He was so cold.

But something hot was in his face, and it was in his eyes, and he was trying to blink it away, but the wind was right, he should just sleep.

Just sleep. Everything would be okay.

He just needed to sleep.

The last thing Steve thought he saw, lying there on his back on the soft, damp carpet was the image of Billy Hargrove above him. Straddling him, laying his split knuckles into Steve's face - those beautiful features screwed up in empty, black fury.

Everything went dark – beyond the darkness of his home, or the inside of his eyelids.

Just....dark.

2. Try this trick and spin it, yeah.

Notes for the Chapter:

Pixies - Where is my mind?

Day 2

Billy slammed his locker shut with a metallic clang, focusing for only a second on spinning the dial closed. He tossed his jean jacket back on, from where it had been hidden away in his locker. Popping the collar. He was fucking cold.

Fuck Hawkins, and fuck Indiana, and fuck these sub zero temperatures. It had actually rained yesterday, but it definitely hadn't been a Cali rain. Oh no. It had actually been like ICE. Like that was a THING here. Ice-rain. He'd heard of sleet but hadn't had the pleasure, and this whole place was shit, even the weather was demented.

Behind the cover of his locker door, Tommy was looking right at him, a huge, kinda goofy smile on his face like he was proud of himself. He was leaning against the neighboring locker that he'd just finished writing 'CUNT' on in big, black, sharpie letters. Arms folded over his chest all cocky, like he was looking for praise from Billy. He didn't get it.

Billy didn't know whose the fuck locker it even was, they never seemed to be at it when he was around, but apparently Tommy did. Or maybe he didn't. Billy wouldn't put that past the guy.

"Hey man!" Tommy said.

Billy just grunted and gave him a nod. He felt like death warmed over after last night.

Tommy immediately fell into step with Billy as he strode down the hallway towards his next class, boot heels clipping.

"You hung over?"

Another grunt, and a vague shrug. What were words?

Carol flitted towards them, she attached herself at Tommy's side. Obviously attracted by some kind of internal magnetism the two shared, because she seemed to be able to find the squirrel-faced boy ANYWHERE.

She was smacking gum and giving Billy eyes over Tommy's shoulder, as she always did, even though she had some kind of fierce loyalty to riding that dick. Tommy'd proudly told him once that they'd been fucking since Middle School, and she obviously wasn't going anywhere.

Not that Billy particularly cared. They were meant for each other, squirrel-y little ass-kissing hoser and his loyal bubblegum bitch, always ready to spread her legs for him.

Jesus Christ they annoyed him. But he put up with them, because it was always useful to have sheep following you.

"Hey baby,"

Carol cooed at Tommy as she latched onto his arm with a sway in her hips, cracking Bubble-Yum bubbles in his ear as she licked his neck. Her hair was lifted up with a huge scrunchie today in a pattern that matched her vibrant blouse, hanging off her shoulders. The fabric looked like a paint store had thrown up. Her pencil skirt barely covered her ass, even though it was November. The multiple bracelets jangling on her wrist grated in Billy's ears.

"Where you been? Did you hear?"

Tommy sloppily kissed her once, with no skill or finesse as they were all walking, and he stole the gum from her mouth to keep chewing it. Laughing like an ass brayed at the look on her face. She put a fresh piece into her mouth. Billy rolled his eyes at how disgusting they were.

"Class, duh. And *did I fuckin' hear!*"

Carol crowed back at him, like it was even a question, the fresh stench of too-sweet bubblegum wafting around the trio. They parted the student body down the hallway like a hot knife through butter. Billy fucking loved it. The way those bodies made way for him.

"Hear what?" Billy snapped, annoyed.

"You didn't hear man? 'cause your late, I guess. Aw shit it's too good."

Tommy grinned over at him, an arm slung around Carol's shoulders, and she was cackling like the witch on the Wizard of fuckin' Oz as she looked over at Billy, clearly hungry for his reaction to whatever the news was.

"You're gonna LOVE it." Carol smirked.

"You wanna share with the fuckin' *class*?" Billy'd been in a foul mood since he woke up alone and hung over from some mystery syringe. He didn't have the time or the patience for these *dipshits*.

Tommy's mouth dropped open to dish the apparent fresh Hawkins gossip, because Jesus, this was a small fuckin' town and word of shit spread fast here and these desperate hillbillies lapped it up.

But that didn't mean that Billy liked being left in the dark, either. He glanced over at them sharply, jaw ticing tight.

"Well see, so, my aunt works at the hospital, and - "

Tommy was cut off all of a sudden, as a short whirlwind approached them in the middle of the hall – all short brown wavy hair, thunderous blue-dark eyes, in a long belted baby blue floral dress, wielding a kitten Trapper Keeper like a weapon.

Nancy Wheeler was immediately up in Billy's face, glowering up at him, her humble flats planted on the tile floor. He glared at her like a warning to get out of his face, stepping right back into her space, a wild grin on his face, with sharp canines and a wandering tongue.

But she didn't read that warning, oh no, she looked like she was going to slam that kitten Trapper Keeper into his face, and continue to beat him with it on the floor. Her presence immediately stopped their progression to their next class, glowering up at them, her jaw locked, eyes spitting electric blue fire.

Billy'd been fucking WAITING for this moment. He clenched his fists

at his sides, feeling the way the split skin spread over his knuckles, pulling tight, smarting a little. Like he was going to shimmy the slowly-forming scabs open.

He'd been waiting for a second with any of Harrington's little troupe of freaks, and fuck him if Wheeler wasn't one of them, the one that pedo Harrington'd had riding his dick for over a year before Billy had shown up. What was she gonna say? This little bitch that still hung all over Harrington like she hadn't gone and fucked around with that fag Byers? Huh? What did she have to say to him?

Billy tilted his head at an intimidating angle, looping one thumb in the front of his belt, and his fingers itched for a cigarette. Just to hold in a mouthful of smoke and blow it in her little pixie face. He canted his hips into a relaxed posture, leaning his head back with nonchalance. His boots set into the tile.

Wheeler looked like she'd swallowed a nuke, and was ticking down to explode. Like she was gonna grab his ear and pull him away to give him a good talking to. She just wasn't his type, though. Too prude, and too female.

"The fuck you want, miss priss?"

He'd wondered which one of them would approach him first over fucking up Steve Harrington's face. He figured it wouldn't take long, and it really hadn't. He'd just gotten to school.

Max had ordered him to stay away from her nerd-factory friends, and he didn't think Wheeler exactly counted.

"You know exactly why I'm here!" Wheeler hissed up at him.

Carol and Tommy glanced at each other once, just out of the corners of their eyes. Like this was trouble, and they wanted a show.

"You two fuck off. Me and Wheeler have *business*." Tommy ogled at him. Didn't move.

"Did I stutter?" Billy pointed down the hall, his wristwatch glinting. "Jet."

"Fine, man." Tommy scowled at him and shrugged, before as he

started to direct Carol around Wheeler, leading her by his arm around her shoulders.

“Nancy.” Tommy sneered at her like some kind of greeting.

She puffed her cheeks out, her mouth pinched into a tiny thing, as she glowered at them as they passed. Billy barely looked at their retreating backs, merged into one person.

His eyes were still locked on Wheeler’s death glare. He never backed down from a staring contest, and he definitely wouldn’t with this prude, primped up little priss-bitch.

He grinned down at her, all mean, sharp white teeth. His tongue traced his lower lip, hungry for a fight, even a verbal one.

“What, Harrington come crying to you to lick his wounds for him? You here to defend the King’s honor? Can’t do it himself, huh?”

Wheeler gaped up at him, and for a second her apparent rage seemed to falter, like she was confused or something, before it came back ten told.

“You must have heard!” She insisted. “How can you act like this, you heartless asshole!?”

“The fuck haven’t I heard? I’m not some grapevine-starved hillbilly like you people. I’m not running on the rumor mill wheel like Tommy and Carol.”

Wheeler’s gloss pink lips got even smaller, even angrier, sucking in on themselves like she had some kinda black hole in the back of her throat. He wouldn’t want her giving him head. Her eyes got even bigger, her brow got even lower.

She was jabbing towards his chest like she was gonna touch him, and holy shit she better not get the lady balls to do that or he’d snap her fucking fingers, and there was a crowd gathering around them. He usually didn’t hurt girls. He was a goddamn gentleman.

“But you - !” Wheeler started to exclaim, then glanced around at their apparent audience.

She seemed to think better of it. Of airing Harrington's dirty laundry in public, and subsequently revealing who had destroyed the face of the King. She huffed a little sigh through her nose, nostrils flaring.

"Come with me! You need to hear this!"

"I ain't going nowhere with you. Don't think you can tell me what to do, *bitch*."

"You are. Trust me, you are." Wheeler insisted, and immediately started back down the hallway – expecting him to follow.

Billy stood his ground, head still leaned back, a lopsided, lazy smile on his face like a challenge. Watching her back before she turned around, realizing he wasn't following. Like how she could have directed Harrington around and he'd follow like a puppy.

She walked back to him, fire in her steps.

She lowered her voice, whispering as she hissed up at him, like it was a secret, "Steve is in the hospital! Now *COME. ON!*"

Billy went still at that, his brow furrowing a bit, before his face went perfectly empty. Immediately donning his poker face. He hadn't hit Harrington that hard. He knew he hadn't. Right? Not hard enough to lay him up in the hospital. Slowly, Billy started to trail along after Wheeler, until she'd gotten him alone in the empty lunchroom – it wouldn't be filled for one more period. It was only second period now, or at least, it was rapidly approaching. Billy was gonna be fuckin' late. Again.

He thought as he walked, keeping his face completely neutral. His steps slow and languid compared to Wheeler's rapid, almost frantic pace. Unhurried. Honestly, last night was all a little hazy. He remembered Harrington hit first. In fact he'd gotten in a few good hits – hell, Billy let him have that.

Billy could be generous like that.

But Harrington didn't hold a candle to the kind of damage his old man could do, and Billy had taken so much worse, it was like child's play with Harrington at the wheel. Billy had already been worked the

fuck up – he always was after Neil laid hands on him, pressed him flat against a wall, smacked the shit out of him, cowing him into submission like the piece of shit he was. Calling him a 'faggot.'

Telling Billy what to do, always telling him what to do, and NOBODY told Billy what to do. Nobody but his dad. And so he'd just laid into Harrington. He recalled shattering something over his head, something close at hand, something hard enough to hurt real good, because Billy didn't fight fair, he fought dirty, and he knew it. He'd use anything for leverage.

And he remembered his fists in Harrington's face, once he'd head-butted the guy across the crayon-bright paper strewn floor – watching him slide over it like he was on ice or something.

Then hitting him. Again. Again. Again. Reveling in the way his knuckles cracked on bone and cartilage, the wet smack of blood and skin. Like music to his ears, over the furious pounding of his own heart.

"Alright. You wanna tell me what's got your panties all up in a twist, girlie?" Billy's voice echoed slightly in the empty lunchroom – the lunch tables still folded up, towering above them like silent creatures. "I knew Harrington had turned bitch, but didn't think the little pussy'd go crying to some hospital. I didn't hit him that bad. Tell him to put a fucking Band-Aid on it, and grow a pair."

"Seriously? How are you so dense? The entire school is talking about it because Tommy wouldn't shut up."

Billy scowled.

"I was late today because my shit of a step-sister shoved a needle in my neck. Then they *LEFT* me in your freak boy *Byer's* house. Jacked my fuckin' car. That clear enough for you?"

Wheeler cleared her throat, her mouth gaping open – she looked like she was trying not to scream at him. Like he was a fucking idiot.

"First of all? Don't call Jonathan that. And whatever, look, I don't care, but *STEVE* – Steve didn't *GO* to the hospital, Billy, he was *TAKEN* to the hospital!" She clenched her textbooks and notebooks

and Trapper Keeper, all in a neat little row, harder against her tits.

"There a fuckin' difference?" Billy growled.

"YES! It wasn't by *choice*, he – "

Suddenly, Wheeler's eyes were looking all glassy shiny like she was gonna cry or some shit, and Billy took a slow step backwards. He didn't do crying. Not at all.

But there was something sinking in his stomach, and building in his chest, something slow, a bit like a wave that was building up in the ocean --far enough out that it wasn't near the cresting point, too far out to know if it would be the kind you could surf on.

But it was growing. Rising up from his guts.

He couldn't pinpoint what it was, but he was sure it was an emotion, and any emotion was sure to turn into anger. Whatever it started out as, it would sure as fuck turn out to be pure, unadulterated fury.

Billy had no other setting.

But it was *tasting* a bit like *guilt*, just in the back of his throat. Tasted *bitter*.

"Steve, he uh,"

Billy had a bad feeling. Real bad. Panic slowly clawing up his windpipe, and he was fighting it down. Wheeler cleared her throat again, sniffled a little, and it was now that Billy could see that her eyes were a little puffy, a little red rimmed at the edges. Like she'd ALREADY been crying. Maybe like she hadn't slept.

"Steve passed out last night, at his house. He was by himself, and he, I don't know what happened. They don't know. They think that somehow he agitated the damage YOU already did. They found him, and he, he hasn't woken up. He's not waking up." Her voice wavered as she tried to choke down tears. "If Dustin hadn't left his backpack in Steve's car and had to go get it last night, they might not have found him until today. He might have died."

Billy froze. He froze there in the middle of the lunchroom and folded up lunch tables and stupid menus plastered on the walls and bright

billboards of announcements and craft paper. His brain was stuttering over her words, and he was mindlessly biting at his inner cheek, needing to do something with his mouth.

He stared at Wheeler like she'd grown another head, but otherwise, his face was still entirely smooth. Not a wrinkle out of place. Billy Hargrove's face was a blank mask. A careful, calculated, mask. His poker face, one of his best, he thought.

But inside, inside of his carefully constructed facade, his heart was hammering in his chest; he could feel it humming in his neck, pounding in his ears like the beat of a drum. His stomach was pitching.

He'd meant to teach Harrington a lesson, he supposed. But really he'd only been trying to release the fire from his own bones, after the spark had been lit at his house with his back against the bite of bookshelves. It hadn't really been Harrington that he'd had underneath him, whose blood had been on his fists, not in his mind, it hadn't, and he hadn't meant to....hadn't meant to...shit. Shit. Fuck. He could have died? What the HELL?

"The fuck...you talking about." He said slowly, in a quiet voice, like he hadn't heard right, but he had. He had.

"I'M SAYING HE WON'T WAKE UP!" Wheeler shouted, a little hysterical around the edges, and her yelling really echoed back this time, ringing in Billy's ears.

And they just kept ringing.

He saw Harrington's face below him, felt his fists sink into that pretty, pretty, pretty face, trying to destroy it. He heard the 'clunk' as the heavy dish shattered on Harrington's skull, remembered the impact of it in his wrist.

Then, all of a sudden, Wheeler was flaring up like a little firework, and she was sucking up her tears before suddenly approaching Billy. She was wielding her Trapper Keeper, smacking at his chest with it, once, twice, hedging him backwards before he planted his feet and didn't move again. He kept hearing 'he won't wake up.'

"And it's – your – *FAULT!* "

With each word, she smacked his chest again, where his white cotton shirt was buttoned down low to his navel.

Wheeler was sobbing, furious, her tear-damp, pale eyes all screwed up, and Billy was reaching out to grab her by the fucking throat and pushing her out to hold her at arms length – far enough away that she couldn't smack at him anymore.

He shoved her, *nicely*, he thought, against one of the vertical lunch tables, making it rock a little. Kept his hand soft around her skinny little neck. He was just trying to make her fuckin' stop, and he was trying to process what she was telling him, and he wasn't gonna put up with her slapping him with her stupid notebook.

He could have just slammed a fist into her stupid face. But he didn't. Didn't hit girls. Usually. Even if they were a pain in his ass, like now. He was a goddamn gentleman.

"Cut it out." Billy snarled low.

Wheeler glared up at him, scrabbling at his wrist with her nails, drawing lines of blood, before she nailed him in the balls with her little tennis shoe.

What was WITH these people and going for the jewels?

Billy grunted, let her throat loose, and hit a knee as he curled up over his dick, wincing and biting his tongue against making any sound. Breathing hard through his nose with a single grunt.

"Don't damage the merchandise, shit."

She hovered over him, her feet spread wide, glowering down at him in her stupid belted dress, one fist clenched at one side, the other holding her books and shit against the jut of her hip.

"You're going to the hospital." She spat at him like some she-creature, then started screeching like a banshee.

"You're going to the hospital because you're RESPONSIBLE for this! You put him in a coma, you PIECE OF SHIT!"

Nobody told Billy what to do. Billy knew he was a piece of shit.

Respect and responsibility. Billy had been responsible. Harrington wasn't waking up. He wasn't waking up? COMA? He could've died? What the fuck? What kinda pansy couldn't take a simple beating? Billy had had much worse. MUCH worse. But those big, gorgeous, dark chocolate eyes weren't opening. Billy felt a little dizzy when he thought of how excited Tommy and Carol had been. They didn't even know that BILLY had caused it, or they'd be over the moon. He felt sick.

Billy recalled that boy's blood cooling on his knuckles. The vibration of the plate in his wrist. He wasn't waking up. The wave that had been building in Billy's breast was rising higher and higher and higher within his chest, and it was going to choke him when it crested – he just knew it.

It was guilt. It was a *flash flood* of guilt, drowning him with saltwater and regret.

He nodded. Once. He would go.

Billy hated hospitals. *He. Hated. Them.* He could not believe he was here, when he had sworn to himself he would never set foot in another. The hospital room was a disgusting, muted shade of vomit green, and there were ugly Monet-wannabe-motherfucker paintings on the wall, probably from some local that thought they were hot shit.

He kept telling himself it wasn't a hospital, that that wasn't where he was, but once he walked into Harrington's room it was harder to forget. It was obviously some kind of suite, because he had the room to himself – it wasn't the cheap kind where you had to share with other people, the kind his mom had been in.

It made sense, since apparently Harrington's family was made of dough.

He was alone in here, at least as a patient, kept company by people that seemed to come and go – kids at times, adults at times, people Billy didn't really know, but all of them looked at Billy like he was the scum between their toes, a real piece of shit. He got a couple 'You

have a lot of nerve showing up here,’ from Byers, and ‘what the fuck is wrong with you?’ from the kid in a cap, and even an ‘I’m glad you came,’ from this weird old lady with ratty brown hair.

But they all came and went, ‘cause apparently the curly-haired kid had to get to school. Wheeler got Billy to where he needed to go, and made sure he stayed, then she was gone too, tiredly explaining they’d all been there for most of the night. Only the Chief stayed, a constant, hovering in the background, especially after the kid in the cap had insisted he wouldn’t leave Billy here alone with Harrington because he *‘might finish the job!’*

Billy’d just stood there staring for a while at Harrington in the hospital bed. He felt too big for his skin, like he might burst out of it. Like he might have a panic attack. Harrington was tucked in tight with starched white blankets and a yellow one on top, machines buzzing and beeping around him, tubes snaking around him, and an IV in one arm. A bag pumping fluids.

It was such de-ja-vu that it made Billy sick to his stomach. He thought he might throw up, standing there, his face an impervious mask of no emotion. Trying to tell himself to breathe, only inhaling antiseptic, bleach, and the sour stench of death.

He’d approached Harrington’s bed tentatively. So slow. Painfully so. Harrington looked so small in that bed, so still, engulfed in the perfectly tucked blankets. Even his hair was sad and deflated. The guy was pallid beneath the swell of his face, the vibrant, ugly dark marks of bruises and the split of his nose, his brow, his lip. Freckles standing out starkly.

He also had a nasty gash just on the right of his forehead. There, and also at the top of his hair where it was parted funny, there were stitches. They laced up his forehead, and down along his scalp where Billy had broken the plate, all the way down to his temple. Mapping over his angry red skin like railroad tracks.

Those stitches were holding him together like Frankenstein’s monster. Billy’s stomach rolled. Looking down at his own handiwork. Did that make Billy Frankenstein? His eyes traced the way those wounds and blossoms of bruises reminded him of his own in the mirror, after his

pops was done with him.

Shit. Harrington was so *still*. Deathly still. And so pale beneath the livid brushstrokes of magenta and blue violence.

At some point, because time didn't seem quite real, one of the doctors talked to Billy, but he felt as if the Dr. speak went in one of his ears and out the other. Billy vaguely remembered fistng his hand into the doc's white coat and pulling him close, growling in his face, 'Tell me what you know, *doc*.'

The doctor's voice had wavered as he nervously adjusted his glasses.

"We-well, it looks like he had some sort of blunt trauma to the head yesterday, and possibly another occurrence from last year around this same time that went untreated. The worst of the recent damage was at the upper portion of the cranium. More than likely he would have been alright, given time, and was probably functioning, though he should have sought medical treatment to be safe if there was a possible concussion. However, it appears that he must have lost his balance and hit his head again after the incident. Perhaps he grew dizzy, which is a common occurrence. That was the last straw, as it were. Trauma to the head can be a tricky thing, dependent on location. Difficult to assess. We're hoping he regains consciousness shortly. We should know within the next twenty four to forty eight hours.'

So Billy had released the doc, and settled himself into the chair at Harrington's bedside, feeling numb. Listening to the steady beep of Harrington's heartbeat. Watching how not even an eyelash stirred on the unconscious boy. It was his fault. This was Billy's fault. He thought about what the doc said, about twenty four to forty eight hours. Know? Know what? If Harrington would wake up at all?

Wheeler had told him she'd be using Harrington's car to ferry the kids in his absence, and she would get Max. Something about the Chief of Police making an excuse to his old man.

Billy didn't move.

Even when the bearded man, apparently the Chief they'd talked about, got his statement down.

He didn't move. Face buried in his hands. Drowning in the waves.

3. Your head will collapse.

Notes for the Chapter:

Day 3

“Can’t repeat the past?... Why of course you can!”

Steve stood in the dark.

Everything was cold. Steve was so cold. And his head hurt. It wasn't the greatest combo, to be honest. And there was something on him that weighed a million pounds, pressing him down into a soft surface. His body felt heavy, as if it couldn't be lifted by his own sapped strength and empty bones, so he simply lay there. Stood there? Lay there.

Lay there beneath the weight, spread out over him, a blanket of darkness, a blanket of ice, because he couldn't get warm and Jesus his head hurt like a fuckin' bitch. Why did it hurt so much? The first thing to occur to him was that he'd drank too much. He knew that he was usually pretty sensitive to hangovers in the morning, so he usually tried to avoid getting blackout drunk for that reason.

Tried to eat food and drink water and all that shit. Soak up the alcohol, and water it down. Set the drink down when he felt himself getting close to his limit, because he didn't want to end up with his head in the bushes or in a porcelain bowl, only to have his brain unravel in the morning with this pounding sort of pain, all lit up nerve endings in his temples firing off what an idiot he was for drinking like a water starved fish on land.

Sometimes the pain came and went, and there seemed to be funny gaps of time where there was simply...*nothing*.

Steve stood in the dark.

There would be a beep, and then the pain would turn into these clouds in his veins and sunshine in his skull. It felt a bit like getting high, smoke on his tongue, burning in his lungs as he sealed his

airway, eyes fluttering closed. Letting it stream out through his nostrils, or attempting to do smoke rings like he was a bad ass, even if they looked more like solid spheres instead of air-light SpaghettiO's. Sitting on the swings.

Another thing he was aware of in these gaps of time was that he couldn't open his eyes. These, too, felt weighted down. Like something was pressing on them, keeping them closed, forcing them shut, and when he tried to lift a finger, he was disconnected from the movement. Like his bones weren't pieced together anymore, the head bone was *not* connected to the neck bone, because the line from his brain had been severed, too.

It might have been almost alarming if not for the bouts of funny soupy yellow sunshine and cloud hazed veins, like when you stood on the sidewalk of Hawkins in the early morning to watch the chilly mist burn off with golden sunbeams spilling through the gaps in the tree branches.

Surrounded by forest. And like...*really* high.

With trees that seemed almost friendly. Yeah, friendly trees. Protective. Trees from what...what he thought might have been his childhood. Running along paths he knew as well as the back of his hand, but couldn't...couldn't quite seem to visualize when he tried to think of it.

"And so with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer."

Thoughts like this, ones that he could see but couldn't quite grasp, seemed to come and go like the tide. Surrounded in nothing but silence, or something a bit like a radio silence – all fuzzy static, and nothing entirely clear. A radio station that you couldn't quite get tuned in, always in-between airwaves.

Like sometimes he could hear a buzzing, that sounded almost like people talking – words he desperately wanted to hear, in this cold, dark place. With memories at the tips of his fingers that he couldn't quite get a grip on.

Steve stood in the dark.

It settled on him after some time like this, time that felt like it could have possibly been seconds, or minutes, or years. Decades. Time that he couldn't grasp, ebbing away from him, in this oppressive, cold darkness.

Alone.

But somehow, that loneliness...that didn't feel foreign. That didn't feel new. That felt like an old friend. One he knew well.

"I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others — young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life."

And it seemed like there were a lot of things, a lot of memories, a lot of thoughts – lurking in that inky black space right beneath his eyelids. Close enough to touch, but he couldn't lift a hand to try.

Things that made him wonder about those forgotten trees, made him question them – things that hissed with pain, and clicka-clicked in the shadows, whose twisted bodies made a soft 'whump' as solid wood grain met slick flesh, screaming.

They had no names.

"He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass."

And bright blue looking up at him, framed in heavy lashes, before looking away – looking away at the question of love, not meeting his own. Never truly looking at him. Never seeing him.

He didn't know those eyes.

"He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was."

A cavernous home with cathedral high ceilings, shadows in the corners, just as quiet and spotless as that revered space, with hushed tones and blank walls.

He wondered who could live there.

"People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away."

Steve stood in the dark.
He stood there alone.

Surrounded by nothing, with only the confusing jumble of disordered thoughts in his head, and the pulsing heartbeat of pain that came and went like the waves of an ocean he had never seen.

With the muffled silence of fresh powdered snow on a mountaintop, although he didn't know if he'd ever skied, and the shush of a radio he could not adjust.

Steve stood in the dark, memories at his unmoving fingertips, and he could not remember.

In the wash of bits of memory and thought, spread out before him like playing cards on a table, Steve thought of one with a face – one that inspected him with a quiet ferocity, those blue eyes burning into him, through him, like an ember through wrapped cigarette paper. Turning him to ash beneath their gaze. As bright as he thought they ocean might be. Never looking away from him.

Steve knew those eyes.

"Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope."

And maybe that one thing that he could remember, that one thing he could really sink his teeth into, that...that grounded him. Kept him there in that place, instead of drifting in the abyss.

Kept him thinking. Kept him standing. Kept him on his feet.
Standing in the dark, feet planted.

'You were moving your feet. Plant them next time, draw a charge.'

With who knows how much time having passed, sometimes... sometimes the radio station would go in tune.

Like it was shifting around, looking for a clear station, the dial having been spinning for a while. Searching, searching. Finally landing. But the reception was still pretty shit, and there were still gaps of that radio silence. The dial spinning like a compass that couldn't find direction.

The voice only came at times, all mixed up, when there was nothing but silence to surround that soft, gritty, familiar voice.

Yes, he knew the voice that was speaking to him, as if from a great distance. A distance he could not seem to cross, a gap he could not find a bridge over.

The moments shuffled together like those cards in the deck, and he didn't know what came first and what came last. The seconds were out of order.

But he knew the voice that spoke to him. The soft rustle of the vowels, the rough mannerisms of the words, the way the finer words seemed almost foreign to his brusque tongue – and yet he spoke with the elegance of one reading Shakespeare. As if it couldn't have come more naturally, voice hushed, as if those careful words were for Steve, and Steve alone.

And the words seemed to call him, nestled safe and warm in his chest, each one like bright embers keeping him warm against the jet chill around him. Asking him to come home.

It occurred to him that the boy was reading to him.
Through the night, the quiet, and the fear.

"He smiled understandingly-much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced--or seemed to face--the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey."

Steve stood in the dark.

Soon the radio station of readings was gone again, leaving Steve nothing but static. He drifted in and out of what he thought might be something like sleep, gaps of time lost to the nothing. Trying to think of what was missing, but there wasn't anything to remember.

And suddenly he was not alone.

It wasn't the boy's voice on rough airwaves, and it wasn't the landlocked memories too distant from Steve's shore on the rolling ocean.

It was a person. A real person. Standing in front of him in the inky black pit which Steve had fallen inside of, far within the earth, or possibly hell, removed from sunlight, starlight, or a glow of any kind. Hidden away from warmth.

It was a girl. Just a little girl.

She stood before him on bare feet, watching him with large dark eyes, so much like the ones he thought he had imagined before, the ones that drifted away from him, wouldn't keep him in focus – the owner, he couldn't recall.

But these eyes were different, younger, fiercer, more reserved. Like they held a secret. Like they knew what made the world.

They looked through Steve in a way even familiar cerulean ones did not. Made him feel see-through in an unsettling way, made him feel seen. Known.

He wasn't sure what to make of it, in this big, empty place – like the endless universe, all of her stars stolen away to leave only the black.

The girl was dressed in a floral thermal shirt with an over-sized, plaid button up over it, and too baggy jeans with bare toes peeking out from beneath the ragged hems. Her hair was wild, curly and unruly, and it reminded him of someone else's hair – but he didn't know whose.

"Steve." The girl said.

Steve stared at her. He couldn't move. Couldn't step towards her, couldn't shift away. He was frozen in this place. Couldn't lift a finger if he tried. And he had. So many times. He'd tried to move, to run, to get out of this place – fuck, he'd even tried to scream, but he couldn't make a sound. He could only watch and observe, but before her, there'd been little to see beyond his own mind.

She seemed to understand that, in that see-through-Steve kind of way

she had.

She gave him a small, albeit sad smile. She stepped towards him instead, saving him the trouble. She reached up her tiny hand, all pale and bright like white fire in the shadows, and pressed it to his cheek. She was a shock of heat, of flame in the winter cold. She almost seemed to *glow*.

"It's O.K."

Steve felt himself suck in a breath through his nose. He thought he heard a beeping, and the beeping was getting faster – matching the rise of his own heart. Beating in his chest harder, louder, heavy in his ears. It made his head pound more with each shuddering heartbeat.

He was looking at her, desperately, trying to convey anything. To communicate wordlessly. He was trapped here. He didn't know where 'here' was. Who was she? How did she know his name? Why was she dressed like that? He didn't care. He was thankful she was here, that anyone could see him – when he had felt all but invisible. Lost. So lost. He felt as if he had been invisible for a long time. A thousand years or more. Frozen. It was not 'O.K.' His numb lips wanted to form the words. But he could only stand.

Steve stood in the dark.

But he was no longer alone.

She still smiled up at him, so gentle, and her palm was so soft – the smooth, unblemished skin of a child, palm less lined than that of an adult – like satin. Blazing with heat. A human touch.

Steve felt a sob shake his chest. Felt tears burn on his cheeks. He wanted to beg her to help him, to tell him what to do. But he didn't know if she needed help too – if he needed to help *HER*. Because he would, he would, oh, if only he could move. To lift a foot from where it was locked in place. Planted in place. Draw a charge.

"*Time to wake up, Steve.*" Was all she said. So gentle.

But he wasn't asleep. He wasn't asleep, was he? But he couldn't tell her that. Couldn't say a thing. His throat was working, he was

TRYING, but he could barely breathe. He wanted to tell her that he didn't want to be here anymore, in this cold, dark place. He wanted to scream it. He was scared.

She seemed to understand.

She seemed to *know*.

And then she was gone as quickly as she had come, like a shooting star blazing out of life. But Steve could still feel her presence.

"And as I walked on I was lonely no longer. I was a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler."

Steve's dark eyes, all sun warmed chocolate, opened slowly. Like they couldn't quite remember how to do it. A forgotten art. He squinted against the fluorescent lights, and what might have been dying evening sunlight through the windows. Or it might have been really early morning. Who knew.

But it was way too bright, making his eyes want to flutter back shut, so he let them – just until they could adjust a little. He mumbled something, but he wasn't sure what – his mouth was dry as paper, tongue scraping against the roof of his mouth, and there was sleep in his eyes, making them gritty as he tried to lift a hand – the dull tug of an IV in his forearm.

"Euh?" He asked in a rather articulate manner.

His face felt all raw, yet crunchy, with the ache of bruises, and it occurred to him when he tried to open his eyes again, mouth gaping open, that it was scabbed over – the scabs pulling with the facial muscle movements. Even his eyes felt sort of tender and just a little swollen.

He realized it should probably feel worse, but there was a bit of a buzz all over his skin making him feel a bit numb and pleasant. Even the pounding in his head was pretty low key, like the 'mute' button

had been pressed. His one free hand fumbled with his face, fingers exploring blindly, trying to remember what had happened, but even his own fingertips registered very little. His cheeks were wet, as if with tears and salt. Along his forehead, he felt the ridges of stitches like railroad tracks.

They were the good drugs. Had he been in a car accident, he wondered? That seemed like the best explanation. ‘cause he felt like he’d been hit by a car. In the fuckin’ face.

Steve tilted his head, eyes cracking open, still trying to adjust from the darkness of his own eyelids, and he saw a blurry figure next to him sitting in a chair – maybe one of his parents, he thought vaguely, and they were setting what might have been a book on a small table. Someone was shouting, calling out in a deep voice.

Then people were talking, chattering all loud, and time seemed to skip and suddenly there was a gathering of people around him – like this big gaggle, and he was opening his eyes wider – things were getting clearer, coming into a sharper focus, and there wasn’t anyone sitting at the bedside anymore, even when he tried to look. Like they’d been lost in the crowd of people that were suddenly gathered around the hospital room. The walls were an ugly vomit green color, and the popcorn ceiling was all white panels, slotted together. The world still a little bit blurry around the edges as figures crowded around, half shoving each other with impatience.

Boy’s voices.

“Holy shit he’s awake!”

“Did it work? It worked! She did it! Are you seeing this?!”

“Thank you, thank you. Oh, oh man, Steve! Steve!” Then all soft, “How you doin’, bud? Huh?”

“Jeez, back off, Dustin! Give him space! Look at him!”

“Yeah he looks like shit.”

“Shut up, Mike! He looks beautiful! He’s *alive!*”

“You guys are TOTALLY freaking him out!” A young girl said.

"Will ALL of you shut up?" A teenaged female voice, now, hissing at them. "It's not the time, give him a second!"

"Will, guys, come over here." An older, soft spoken boy said. "Let's give him some room, he's just woken up."

There was a scattered looking woman at his side with short, frizzy brown hair and for a second Steve thought she might be a nurse, even though she was wearing casual clothing, not scrubs. She was helping him sit up, propping pillows up behind him so that he could crawl up a little from his laying down position. He was pulling at the IV uncomfortably, a bag of liquid hovering somewhere above his head.

"Steve, sweetie, how do you feel? Oh we were so worried. You really gave us a scare. The nurse is just here, dear." Frizzy-hair woman with the big brown doe eyes was saying.

She was patting his shoulder, and Steve shied away from her a little. He didn't know her, and it was kinda weird.

"You doin' alright there, kid?" This grizzly of a man asked.

Where was his mom?

And yeah, there was another lady in the typical scrubs and crazy red curls smiling down at him. Steve blinked up at her, mouth so dry, and she was handing him a glass of water. He chugged it down like he'd been in the desert or something, but there wasn't much water in the cup to start with.

"Steven, my name is Wilma. Are you in pain? Do you know where you are?" The nurse asked him, voice quiet. She glanced around. "I'm sorry about all of the people. Are you alright with them being here? They didn't want you to wake up alone, and your parents are flying in this afternoon. They said they're family."

Steve's mouth wanted to work a little better after getting some water down his throat.

"Mm...muh..." He tried, squinting, running a hand through his floppy, limp brown locks. His hair felt greasy and gross, and his arm was

weak, almost limp when he lifted it.

He peered around at the gaggle of bizarre strangers around the bed, a little shell shocked at their presence.

There were a bunch of goofy looking kids. An angry looking boy with brown hair that looked like he'd just smelled a pile of shit, and a quiet looking boy with a shy smile and a bowl cut, an intense looking boy wearing all camo with a bright grin, a boy with huge anxious eyes that crinkled at the corners, and a girl with long red hair, a pinched mouth, and pale blue eyes was with them.

There was also a huge, burly looking cop with a half grown in beard, holding his big Indiana Jones hat at his side, hair swept back as he studied Steve with a serious gaze. A reassuring smile on his face, like some big dad or something.

And of course the lady who had spoken to him first, with the kinda crazy brown hair and big kind eyes with worry lines around her soft mouth, nicotine stains on her fingers.

And there to the side, a girl and boy around his age – she was a classic kind of beautiful, with a short, wavy chin-length bob, her tight mouth drawn in worry, deep eyes wide as she studied him like a map she knew well.

And this gawky boy stood next to her, with thatch brown, side swept hair and beady eyes that watched him with what could only be described as pity. An arm around the girl's shoulders.

They were a random assortment, that was for sure. Steve blinked again.

"Uh...Yeah. I'm in the hospital? I...feel like shit." He said, looking up at the nurse, with her cropped red curls and small green eyes, watching the way she watched him – checking on his vitals and his blood pressure and shining a little light in his eyes as he grimaced at the intrusion.

"No..uh...no offense. Family? But I don't, uh."

Steve looked around the ragtag bunch surrounding him, neither of his parents to be seen. He...he didn't think. His parents weren't here, were they? He cleared his throat like it might help him think.

"I don't know...them." He said slowly. "I don't know who the fuck those people are." He winced, head sore. "Am I...supposed to?" He asked after a second, looking back up at the nurse as the best source of authority here. Maybe he shouldn't have said fuck.

Everybody froze.

"When are my parents getting here? I...what happened? Why am I here?"

He could hear the heart rate on the monitor starting to crawl higher, the little beep picking up the pace. He squirmed in the bed. He wanted more water. He wanted someone here he knew.

The nurse glanced up, looking around at the gaggle of people. They were all staring at Steve like he'd grown two heads, a couple of their mouths had popped open.

The guy with the beard was scrubbing a hand over his face, palm rasping over his long stubble, looking at the ground. He was muttering what sounded like '*Jesus Christ.*'

Frizzy-hair woman had covered her mouth with both slender hands, tears shimmering in her eyes.

"You don't know who we *are?*" Curly-haired boy asked, shock plain on his face. In his voice. He made some sort of shocked choking sound. "You, you're kidding, right? Right, Steve? You..You don't know *me?*"

Steve stared back at him, chewing on a lip, but he quit it when he split it open again – tasting copper and doubt. He thought about them saying they were family.

"...are you my cousin or something?" Steve asked tentatively, feeling dumb, but trying his best.

Curly-hair boy flung himself against one of the other kids with way too much drama, wailing a little. The boy in the camo.

He didn't like it. Didn't like feeling like he didn't know something. It made him feel itchy. His whole body felt heavy and he was kind of drowsy and a lot of this wasn't making sense.

"I don't remember what happened." Steve said. "Was there – I mean, was there an accident?"

Even his speech sounded slow, a little slurred in his own ears. Maybe it was the good drugs they had him on. Everything was too bright. Too real. He felt like he'd been living under a rock.

"What the *hell* happened?" He felt like he was on the edge of panic now. Things were speeding up, and he couldn't quite catch his breath. Why was he here? Why were these people *here*?

"Oh, oh Steve, dear....no...baby, there was an - an *accident*, but we -" Frizzy-haired woman said, sounding choked up as she started to step forward, a hand outreached.

The nurse held up a hand, stopping her from continuing.

"I think maybe you all need to go to the waiting room, while we have the doctor evaluate him. Memory loss can be common – "

"Wait, memory loss?" Steve interrupted, glancing between the woman and the strangers. His head was starting to hurt more as he tried to remember – tried to remember anything. "What, I mean I don't...what do you mean memory loss? What accident? Was there a car accident?"

He looked around for an answer, any answer, for a face he knew. The blood draining from his face.

But only those unfamiliar faces were stirring around him, uncomfortable, overwhelmed, obviously getting ready to shuffle out, and all of a sudden everyone's voice were starting back up, buzzing together, and it sounded a bit like bees – it made him think of rain, made his head hurt, and Steve clenched his eyes shut for a minute. He felt so disoriented and nothing was making sense. He opened his eyes again. Nurse Wilma was starting to herd them out, as most everyone seemed reluctant.

"No, I'm not leaving him like this! Look at him! While his mother isn't here, I need to be here. He needs answers, he needs – " Frizzy-hair lady was saying.

The nurse was shooing her. "You need to trust us. We will take care of him. This is overwhelming him, and he needs rest. This can make things worse."

"I *won't* – "

"Then I'll call security."

Frizzy-haired lady fumed.

Only the cop was standing back, like he wasn't going anywhere, and clearly no one could make him. "I'll watch him, Joyce."

"NO, Hop. If you think for ONE second that I - " "

As their ranks broke apart, Steve suddenly caught a glimpse of someone else that had been just beyond them, behind their line. Someone with long golden curls, a strong jaw line, face partially turned away as he, too, started towards the door. Shoulders of his jean jacket slumped, as if with some unseen weight. A deadly line of tension between his shoulder blades.

"Hey!" Steve said. "Hey, wait!"

All of their heads snapped up, looking at him over their shoulders as they were shuffling towards the door - minus frizzy-haired lady. Maybe with something like hope.

Only that one boy didn't look up, kept his head down, eyes turned away. Hands lodged in his jean pockets. Probably the only time Steve thought he hadn't met him eye for eye.

"You! I mean, I know you."

Literally all of them pointed at themselves like a question, looking at each other. Like, you? Me? Muttering among themselves.

Everybody but that one boy.

Steve sat up a little straighter, tangling in cords, his heart pounding in his chest, because there was at least one face he knew here. One person he recognized. It made him feel a little bit clearer, not as blurry around the edges, because he KNEW someone – it made him feel not as alone. Not as lost within his own mind. Almost giddy with the relief.

He *KNEW* him.

He knew that boy.

Steve felt a relieved grin spread across his face, worrying his lip open a little more, making it sting, heart hammering, head splitting open despite whatever the fuck they had him on.

Those people he didn't know were all glancing at each other, trying to figure out who he meant – and Nurse Wilma was looking back at him.

"Who, honey?" She asked.

"That guy!" He gestured right at the mullet-boy, IV tube swinging. Steve couldn't help the weak, relieved laugh that spilled from his lips, like a breath. "Jesus, man. You're here. I didn't see you. Shit, I know you."

He glanced at the nurse, draining away his tension as he tried to explain to her, too. He really did feel a little giddy, smiling stupid. "I didn't see him."

Then his eyes were drawn like a magnet back to the one thing he knew, like a magnet. Like he needed to see that one thing he could remember. A rolled up paperback book was sticking out of the back pocket of his really, really tight jeans. He was a familiar rock to cling to in the rough sea of his mind.

Memory loss? Memory loss. He'd lost his memory? But he knew this one thing.

Mullet-boy turned to him slowly amidst the gathering of unfamiliar faces. The look on that one, well-known face was unreadable. Mouth a carefully still line, dark brown furrowed like a thundercloud, lids

half lowered to shade his blue eyes with the fan of his long, dark lashes.

Steve's mouth had spread wide, teeth bright as he grinned at mullet-boy. Everybody else was staring at him too. Some mouths hanging open, with a lot of confused faces, and a couple of the kids were looking between Steve and mullet-boy almost comically. But Steve wasn't really paying attention to the people he didn't know.

"You mean...Billy? Billy." Frizzy-haired lady asked slowly. Gently.

"Billy! Yes. Billy. I knew that. Don't go." Steve said abruptly, like he'd known the name. He knew the face. He just needed help with the name.

He didn't want to be left alone. He didn't. Not alone. He glanced at the nurse for some kind of approval, needing it.

"Billy can stay, right? I, I do know him." He didn't care about the others, even if they seemed nice enough.

The nurse opened her mouth a little like she wasn't quite sure what to say, glancing between the two, the boy on the bed, and the boy that stood there, ramrod straight, hands locked in his pockets, and the other people that seemed so confused it didn't seem warranted.

"Steve...you know who this is?" The pretty brunette with the wavy bob asked, looking at him all careful, her voice low. Eyes squinty with thought.

"Well *yeah*." Steve said like it was obvious, looking around at all of the other astonished, baffled looks he was getting. His grin fell away a little, fell flat. "What?"

Billy just stood there, hands in his jean pockets, watching him with this bizarre expression. Emotion creeping over his face like the spread of autumn frost over a still lake. Freezing up. Like he was in trouble or something.

The girl with long waves of red hair was pushing Billy forward from behind and he just sort of staggered forward, all stilted and stiff with his hands still in his pockets, almost losing his balance – standing

between the group and the hospital bed now, sticking out painfully like a sore thumb.

He looked frozen there, shoulders rigid around his ears, and anger was starting to replace the ice in his face – the line of his jaw going sharp and mean, his mouth curling into an ugly shape, brow digging low as his eyes flashed with blue fury.

Like he was about to say something nasty, scathing.

Watching Steve with this fierce gaze, Billy's chest was rising and falling rapidly, like he couldn't quite catch his breath. He looked like a cornered wolf, trapped between the strangers and Steve. Ready to lash out. He'd pulled his hands from his pockets, and now they curled and uncurled at his sides in this unsure sort of way.

Steve felt his own brow pucker a little, couldn't quite determine what had just happened, but he could read that guy well enough that he could see all of these things in his body language – just wanted to make it better. Was it something he'd done? That he'd said?

Steve lifted a hand weakly, like he could somehow smooth away that look on Billy's face.

"Why wouldn't I know him?" He asked everyone, asked the girl, incredulous, like *they* had lost their minds - not him.

Billy looked like he was about to scream. Everyone was staring. Like he was stupid or something. The tension was so thick in the room it felt a bit like drowning in the antiseptic sweet air.

Steve glanced around at them, unknowing, unsure, before focusing on Billy. No one was answering him.

Steve gave Billy a small, tentative smile, watching him with big, dark, raccoon bruised eyes across the distance that felt farther than it should.

"Well, I mean. We're best friends...aren't we?"

Silence.

Notes for the Chapter:

-excerpts of Billy reading from The Great Gatsby by
F. Scott Fitzgerald in absolutely no order

4. And there's nothing in it

Notes for the Chapter:

Day 3

The hospital room was filled with a bunch of crickets. Billy stared at Harrington, zeroed in on him with huge blue eyes, his mouth half ajar as he'd been preparing to say something, a Dum-Dum half hanging out of his mouth – to say something about defending himself, he supposed, something like an excuse, since apparently, for some reason Harrington – of all things – remembered BILLY and probably him pounding his face in. But he never quite made it there – because of the bullshit that came out of Harrington's mouth.

Billy's own mouth snapped closed, audibly, the silence in the room was so great. The Henderson kid burst into nervous laughter first, before Sinclair punched him in the arm, effectively shutting him up. The nurse with the curly red flyaway hair and scrunched up nose, and the name tag 'Wilma' was looking around at them, clearly not understanding the funny silence.

Then she looked back over at Harrington, smiling real tootsie-pop sweet, giving Harrington that little-kid treatment like they always did in hospitals – Billy hated that shit – talking to you like you was five even if you were a grown ass adult. Harrington wasn't no little kid.

"Sure, he can stay, sweetie. That's great that you remember, he – " The nurse started, but Joyce Byers lay a hand on the nurses arm, shaking her head a little – leaned in and whispered real fervently in her ear, hiding her mouth behind the cup of her other hand.

The Wheeler boy, in miniature, had suddenly dragged Will back and they were talking in heated whispers together, throwing Harrington huge looks from behind the Joanie girl bitch – Nancy Wheeler. The Chief's face had just sorta crumpled in something like deep thought as he studied Harrington, nodding slowly, before he turned his big huge cop look on Billy himself. Boring into the side of of skull like some kinda worm with his gaze.

Billy didn't really look back though – he was too busy staring at

Harrington. A very awake, a very alive, Harrington – even if he looked half dead around the edges. He was awake, awake, awake, awake. The word was on repeat in Billy's mind. AwakeAWAKEAWAKEAWAKE. Harrington was still looking back at him with those tired, swollen dark eyes, puffy around the edges from where Billy'd knuckles bruised 'em good. But his vision also kept flicking around to the other people surrounding Billy as what must have seemed a sea of strangers.

He looked confused at the bizarre reaction to his question, his rather sure statement, that Billy Hargrove was – in fact – Steve Harrington's best friend. Billy just stared at him stupidly. Harrington gave him a tiny, unsure smile that looked like it hurt his face – and he looked real small in that hospital bed, tucked in to death in that stiff white sheet and the yellow, scratchy wool blanket. Like maybe he really was a kid, and the nurse had it right.

“...What?” Harrington asked, obviously unsure of himself now.

“Just wait here dear – I'll be right back. Come along now, all of you – you too.” Nurse Wilma said as she patted Billy's shoulder.

Billy almost clocked her for fucking touching him, but he ambled outside with the rest of them, having trouble dragging his eyes away from Harrington – just as the other boy watched him go with anxious eyes.

It was so fuckin' bizarre. It was like waking up in some Twilight Zone land after two nights ago – had it really been so long? – waking up royally messed up after Maxine's little cocktail in that syringe, without his goddamn car, and something similar to a hangover to end all hangovers. And then Harrington had been in a coma, and Billy had stayed even when others had gone, sitting at the side of his bed in some kind of de-ja-vu nightmare.

He'd had his beat up backpack with him, with nothing but a few paperbacks for school in there, a college lined spiral notebook filled with tiny, cramped hand writing, and a pencil. He hadn't really known what else to do – they told him to try talking to him. Said that sometimes that helped, that they could hear your voice. Billy didn't know that Harrington would've wanted to hear BILLY'S voice. That

was probably the last thing he wanted to hear, considering it was Billy that had gotten him knocked out in the first place.

And what was he supposed to say? What could he possibly have said? So he'd dug out his book for AP English that they were supposed to write an essay about – even though Billy had already done that last year back out in Cali (the school system seemed behind Cali here, too – shittier, like everything else.) And so he'd just started reading, because the words were already there, and it had been easy. The words came easy then.

He didn't think of the last time he'd sat in a hospital, reading to someone, reading until he was hoarse with it – until he couldn't talk anymore. He didn't think about that. He tried not to think of where he was or what he was doing, the antiseptic, too-clean smell on the air to cover the stench of the sick. Smelling like a memory. Tried to pretend he was somewhere else, that he was just reading the book for English, or to pass the time. That he wasn't reading it to the still, silent form of Harrington beside him – the dark lashes against his mottled purple cheeks. Someone who surely could not hear him.

Billy kept on eating Dum-Dums that the nurse kept on givin' him, givin' him big bedroom eyes, too, and staring at his chest. But Billy was mostly ignoring her, wasn't in the mood. And he supposed that maybe you could do a lot of 'soul searching' or whatever, even in that short amount of time. What, twenty four hours? Maybe a little more? A day plus change, of sitting at somebody's bedside that you'd almost killed on accident. When your strength was more than maybe you'd thought. And you didn't know if they'd wake up, and if they didn't, if they didn't, it was your fault. Your fault. And he was just like his old man – the one thing he'd never wanted to be.

But then, Harrington, then he'd...he'd actually woken up – midsentence, Billy had seen him stirring. Moving in the cramped hospital bed, the heart-rate monitor picking up the pace, the steady beep-a-beep going faster, and faster. Billy'd screeched the feet of the metal chair against the floor as he stood up, throwing the book down on a table, yelling to get the nurse, the doctor, whoever, because Harrington was FUCKING AWAKE.

And then the whole damn armada was flooding in, surrounding

Harrington, and Billy was hanging around in the back, twisting the retrieved paperback in his hands into a thick tube, which he'd hastily stuffed into his back pocket.

Didn't know what to do with his hands.

He'd glanced at the door – an escape route – and honestly, he'd considered taking it. Harrington was awake, right? Did that mean he was off the hook? That he could get away? That he wouldn't have to FEEL like this anymore? He didn't much wanna be here when Harrington actually saw him, blamed him, for this entire shit show. But something had held him there, especially once he heard Harrington start talking.

He'd glimpsed him through the gaggle of people around him in bits and pieces – a startled eye there, the confused dip of his mouth there – he looked...spooked. Lost. Scared. Didn't much look like he should, waking up with the whole gang around him of all the people Billy usually saw him around with. Like maybe that was normal.

Until...till he said he didn't even KNOW 'em. Not any of 'em. Like they was strangers, even though these were his people, and Billy realized...it hadn't just been the coma. Hadn't just been being asleep for awhile, when the scariest part had been that he might not WAKE UP. Apparently, waking up had not been the magic solution – had not been Billy 'getting off the hook.'

It wasn't fucking over, this nightmare, it wasn't over. Maybe it would never end, after one night of poor choices. Because Harrington... didn't remember. Anyone. Anything. And once again, it was all. Billy's. Fault. The Joanie bitch was right – Nancy Wheeler was right. It was his fault. But holy shit, he'd never meant – he'd never meant for this to happen. For any of this to happen. He'd been slapped around his entire life, taken a beating from his old man nearly every week if not more, knocked around the kitchen, smacked his head on the kitchen counter, or been pushed down in the driveway and had his skull bounce off the cement.

He knew what it was to have a head wound, and yeah, he'd probably had a concussion before. Not that he'd ever had it checked at the hospital. He'd wailed on plenty of faces, and he'd slapped some skulls around, and they were always pretty resilient. How was this

HAPPENING? And of all of the people he'd punched good in his life, of all of the people, it had to be Steve fuckin' Harrington. He really was in The Twilight Zone, and he was well and truly fucked.

Billy had never done this kinda damage to anyone – not the kind that LASTED. The kind that didn't go away. Something like memory, your memory, that...that's what made you. That was your fuckin' life. Something that shouldn't be able to be taken away. Billy felt like he had a clamp 'round his lungs, spinning away, and he couldn't breathe.

"But wait, I thought he could wait here – " Harrington was calling after them. Billy glanced back once at him, unsure, as he was the last to be corralled out of the room.

Once they were in the hall and the door was closed, everyone burst into conversation as the nurse went to get the doc.

"Oh my god, oh my GOD HE DOESN'T remember us. HE DOESN'T REMEMBER ME!" Henderson wailed.

"He doesn't remember anybody! Except BILLY? In what WORLD?" Lucas asked.

"*Billy's my best friend?*" BILLY." Little Wheeler asked all sarcastic, glaring up at Billy like he was trying to solve some kind of puzzle.

"Why does he think YOU'RE his best friend?" Maxine asked Billy from his side, arms crossed tight over her chest.

"How the hell am I supposed to know." Billy said.

"You guys HATE eachother! You're a psycho!" Henderson declared.

"You wanna say that AGAIN?" Billy snarled at him.

"Oh uh – no, nope, I don't. Rethinking that statement." Henderson smiled real cutesy at him. "But I MEAN, you understand my confusion."

"At least he's awake." Little Byers said real soft, looking around at them with his stupid bowl hair cut and pinched mouth.

Billy glanced over his shoulder, narrowing his eyes as he saw the nurse and doc go back into the room where the Chief still was with Harrington. His sharp blue eyes tracked them until the door was closed shut tight.

After a couple minutes, the nurse came back out.

“Alright, so –“ She said to the group, shushing them. “I just want to clarify – young man, you’re Billy? William, yes?” Her eyes went over him from tip to tail, and roved back up - taking it all in.

Billy shifted on his boot heels, crossing his arms tight over the chest of his half unbuttoned shirt, and denim jacket – it was too cold in this hospital. Susan kept sayin’ he needed a warmer weather jacket, but they looked so stupid, he refused. Denim or leather, that was it.

“Yep, that’s me.” Billy winked at her, just to be an asshole - to cover his unease - the Dum-Dum stick she’d given him hanging from his lips.

She tried not to look flustered, and peered around as if to confirm something with everyone, not just him. “Is Steve Harrington in fact friends with this boy?”

“NO!” Was an echoed consensus from most of the kids at the same time – it was almost funny, all at the same time, but Billy wasn’t laughing.

“No. We ain’t friends.” Billy said, glancing away at the white washed wall with another ugly-ass painting with a disgusted look.

“No, I don’t believe they are. At least not ‘best friends,’ according to my sons and their friends. It seems to be, well, kinda the opposite. Billy is...sort of the reason why he’s here.” The Byers woman said, hands fluttering nervously. “Can you tell us why he would think that they are? Friends?”

Maybe at one point he’d wanted to be friends. Or something like it. He wasn’t entirely sure. When he’d gotten to the school, he’d done a lot of asking around about this ‘King Steve’ everybody kept on tellin’ him about. He seemed interesting enough, mostly after Billy caught wind of him the first time and got a glimpse of that face, that hair.

Billy wondered what made him so fuckin' special to have been king of the school before Billy showed up – and he immediately wanted to know what made him tick, enough so that he'd be easy to replace. Yeah, he'd seemed a lot more like someone that Billy wanted to replace than befriend – and it was easy after the guy had turned bitch. He seemed real soft, too soft, for all of the stuff that Billy had heard about him.

But it had also been more than replacing him, Billy supposed. It was more than stepping into his spot – more than taking his friends – more than claiming the title of keg king, and more than being the best. He'd wanted to get under Steve Harrington's skin. He wanted to see the look on his face when he saw that Billy was better than him – how GOOD Billy was, at everything. How cool he could be. Wanted Harrington to think he was cool, fucking amazing. But it had grown into something more. On the basketball court, it had been Billy wanting to give Harrington advice – in the showers, too. Plant your fucking feet, plenty of bitches in the sea, Harrington. But friends? They weren't friends. Anything but.

When the doc came back out, he saw Billy and almost turned tail and ran down the hallway, nervously adjusting his round bifocals as he stared up at Billy – he was actually shorter than him, with graying hair and a mouth like a fish. Billy figured he must have scared him pretty bad the other day when he'd grabbed him by the collar, so this time Billy'd try to be more gentle or whatever.

Instead he just got up in the guys face, his fists curled up tight at his sides as he glowered down at the shortie of a doctor. He pointed the blue, half chewed Dum-Dum in his face.

“What the hell is going on, doc? What’s going on with his memory? Why he think we’re besties, huh? Why don’t he remember nothin’ else?”

“My name is Doctor Welch.” What, like the jelly? “Not doc.” The guy sniffed real dainty.

“I look like I give a damn, *doc*?”

Everybody else was gathering up around the doc in the hall, asking

things like ‘why doesn’t he remember us?’ and ‘will his memory come back?’ ‘why BILLY?’ ‘They aren’t actually FRIENDS.’ ‘Is he totally messed up?!’ Doc ‘Welch’ spoke to everyone, not just Billy.

“Now, now listen, friends. This type of memory loss can be common after a severe head injury, especially with coma circumstances and multiple blows. Now, I’ve spoken with Steven, and he seems to have all of the telltale symptoms. Some of his memory is intact, but not all. It may even be selective. This can almost be expected in this case.”

“But what about –“ Billy snapped.

“Now about his false memories – “ The guy interrupted him. Billy hated that. “ - this can happen. At times, some memories can be false, or replaced with other true memories. We believe this may be the mind attempting to compensate, or processing existing memories in a new way.”

“False memories?” Joyce Byers asked. “So he may have more memories that aren’t real? And what do you mean by selective?”

“It is possible.” He nodded at Billy. “And selective means that only certain memories have been temporarily lost, ‘select’ memories are gone. This boy seems to be the catalyst. Were you possibly the last person he saw before his head injury?”

Billy cleared his throat. “Uh.”

“YES HE WAS.” Maxine said all crazy, throwing herself in front of Billy to get a better look at the doc.

Billy elbowed her out of his way, and she squawked in indignation. “Well you were.”

“Then those memories may be tied around him. It’s almost impossible to tell.”

Everyone broke out in worried murmuring.

“But more often than not their memories do come back – I would not be concerned quite yet.”

“How long can that take?” Joyce Byers asked.

“More often than not?” Does that mean sometimes...never?” That creep Byers asked.

“Oh, it varies, it can be a few days, to a few months.”

“A few MONTHS?” Billy spat, his face still a stony mask.

“Possibly longer. But I wouldn’t worry just yet. The most important thing to remember is that the psyche can be very fragile in this state. The best possible thing is to keep him comfortable, remind him of familiar places, familiar people, and most of all, not to challenge or question the false memories. It’s a coping mechanism of the mind – the best thing to do would be to go along with it for now, and his memories will come back given time and rest.”

“So what, you’re saying we just – we just PRETEND that they’re actually FRIENDS?” Nancy asked, as if she’d been personally offended. “And that he...doesn’t know us?”

“Yes. That is exactly what I am saying. To do otherwise may prove rather detrimental. That is what he believes.”

Billy was standing there, shoulders rigid, staring down at the doc as his jaw clenched, cheek muscles flexing as he tried to think. It was hard, because his brain felt like it was on slow-mode, and he couldn’t make it go fast enough to actually form a thought.

“Oh, this is gonna go really well.” Sinclair muttered.

“Steve’s doomed.” Henderson wailed.

“No, he’s not. Billy just has to help him.” Little Byers said in his quiet voice. “And he can get his memories back.”

“Like that’s gonna happen, how do you think he got like this in the first place?” Wheeler huffed. “Not by Billy helping.”

“You want your ass handed to you, keep talkin’.” Billy snapped, still trying to think.

"It is true." Byers said like some kinda peace keeper. "And don't talk to my girlfriend like that, please."

Jesus he was such a fuckin' wimp.

They were innterupting his thoughts – but also sorta adding to them. This was Billy's fault. And normally, Billy didn't much like taking responsibility for his actions – maybe that was what his dad was always trying to beat into him. That respect and responsibility shit – Billy heard it all the damn time, like a broken record on repeat. Responsibility. He was responsible for Harrington losing his memory – for beating him into an apparent concussion even if, Jesus, Billy really hadn't even meant to hit him that hard.

He could feel the impact of the plate in his wrist – could feel the way the back of Harrington's skull reverberated offa the kitchen floor as Billy straddled him, fucking laying into his face until it wasn't so pretty anymore. Visualizing someone else beneath his fists, instead. Someone else always tellin' him what to do, and Harrington had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Hell, once upon a time, back at the start of moving here – he'd almost wanted to be friends. But that hadn't exactly worked out, had it? Because he couldn't stop pushing Harrington. Pushing and pushing and pushing him, getting under that pretty, freckled skin.

And christ, the way...the way Harrington had said that. Looking at him with those bruised, soul dark eyes, split lips parted just so, with such...trust...Billy swallowed, throat tight, the sharp line of his adams apple bobbing with the movement, staring at the wall for a second. '*We're best friends...aren't we?*' he'd asked. As if he was so sure.

Billy had never had a best friend – not really. Sure, he'd had friends back in Cali – but they always seemed to go away, eventually. No one ever really stuck around. People liked Billy, people liked to be around Billy – and Billy knew that. It was easy to get people to like you and be around you, but that type of connection with someone was difficult to make, it seemed. It wasn't something like when people talked about friends.

When you talked on the phone with them, or hung out with them at the movies, or watched TV or whatever. When you told them secrets. When they knew who you were. Billy never brought people over to his house ‘cause of his old man, and at school, other kids had always just buzzed around him like flies – annoying, but never leaving him alone, either.

You either followed Billy, or you were fucking trash-canned by him. There wasn’t really an in-between, no middle ground, and nothing higher than that, either. Billy didn’t know *how* to be a best friend with someone.

And his first instinct was to walk away. It was to walk away and not look back, because why should he have to feel responsible? Why should he feel this consuming guilt? Why should he have to help Harrington? He didn’t even LIKE Harrington – that’s what Billy told himself, until he could believe it. And Harrington sure as hell didn’t like him.

Harrington had lied to him the other night, which Billy fucking HATED, and had gotten in the way of him kicking Sinclair’s ass for hanging out with his sister when he’d given strict instructions not to – the consequences if Neil found out would fall on Billy’s head, and he was tried of getting smacked around for Maxine’s dumbass mistakes. He wasn’t gonna get another cracked rib again for Maxine hanging out with a black boy when Neil learned about it.

And Harrington had been the first one to throw a hit. It hadn’t been Billy that had started this shit with him. Was it really Billy’s fault? He hadn’t started it, but he sure as hell ended it. He thought again of the way Harrington’s head bounced beneath the impact of his fist. Shit. Billy stuck the blue raspberry Dum-Dum back in his mouth, chewing on it, cracking it loud.

“Fine.” He snapped.

“Fine what?” The Joanie bitch said.

“Fine, I’ll do it.” Billy said like she was a dumbass.

“You’re joking.” Joanie said.

"I fucking look like I'm joking? I say I'll do it, I'll DO it." Billy glared back at her with dialed in blue eyes.

"I believe that would be for the best." The doc said, looking up at him with those nervous, beady gray eyes behind his old-man, wire-rim glasses. "And then after his memory returns, you can just go about your life as normal, I'm sure."

"Yeah. Yeah I'll just do that." Billy frowned, crunching on his blue Dum-Dum.

The nurse kept on giving them to him while he'd been sitting by Harrington's bed – reading to him. Like everytime she came in, she gave him another. Billy thought it was maybe all he'd eaten, 'cause he just felt sick to his stomach. Nauseous. Didn't want real food. Candy had been ok, though, and it kept his mouth busy – which he preferred.

"So I mean what about telling him how he ended up like...that? With his face? If Billy's supposed to be his 'best friend' or whatever. It's Billy's FAULT."

"Ah, so you're the boy." The doc said, readjusting his glasses as he studied Billy like some kind of an insect.

"Yeah, what of it?" Billy grit through his teeth.

"You really need to consider the consequences of your actions, young man." The doc said.

"I'll get on that." Billy said, hands curling tighter into fists. He really wanted to punch this old geezer in his fucking teeth, bash 'em in.

The doc seemed to notice Billy's aggressive stance and the way everyone was watching him like a warning, cleared his throat. "Well I have other patients to attend to. You can decide for yourselves if there's a story you want to tell him. Please let me know if you have any questions." Then he scurried down the hall, some little gray haired rat.

Harrington's weird little band of losers and Maxine all made this huddle to discuss what they should tell Harrington about how his

face had gotten messed up – how he'd lost his memory, since obviously they couldn't tell him the truth about how it'd happened without messing up the whole 'false memory' bullshit.

It sounded made up to Billy, like a huge crock of shit, but he also didn't exactly have a medical degree. But you'd bet your ass he was going to the – he cringed on the word – library, to look it up. Like some total nerd.

"I'll handle it." Billy said, frowning, before he walked back into the room – leaving them half suspended in their plotting, staring after him.

The Chief was sitting in a chair in the corner of the room, arms folded over his chest, and he watched Billy come in with dark, contemplative eyes. He nodded to Billy slightly, and Billy thought about whether or not he was gonna press charges on him for fucking up Harrington so bad.

The Chief made his way out the door, leaving them alone – Billy supposed for Billy to explain, somehow. He didn't know. Billy found his old metal chair back at the bedside, pulling the book out from his back pocket to twist it up in his hands, twisting it into this paper tube again, wringing it between his hands like he was gonna strangle the thing. He was looking down at the bed, not actually up at Harrington, as he slouched forward in his seat – book curled between his hands.

"Hey." Harrington chirped like some little bird, and Billy tentatively drug his eyes back up to meet those swollen ones, swallowing, throat clicking.

"Uh. Hey." Billy said, real articulate like.

"Shit I'm glad you're here." Harrington said in something like relief. "I uh, I think they have me on the good drugs." Harrington smiled, even though it looked like it hurt.

He split his lip open again, making it bleed a little – his tongue swiped out to lick away the trickle of blood. Billy's heart clenched in his chest, watching that pink tongue, and looked away again.

"Probably better than the weed we smoked that one time." Harrington said.

Billy's gaze snapped back to him. What the fuck? They ain't never smoked weed before. They'd never even hung out before. Billy cleared his throat.

"That so?" Billy asked. He didn't know what to say – didn't know what he was doing.

But he knew that the doc was probably right, and even if he hadn't been – the way Harrington had said that, '*we're best friends, aren't we?*' Billy didn't think he'd be able to say otherwise. He'd never... never had that kind of trust directed his way, and shit, he just – he didn't know what the hell to do with it.

"Mmm." Harrington hummed.

That trust. It was like holding this fragile egg in the center of his palm, that would be so easy to drop, so easy to crush, but it had this life inside – that made the egg shell warm to the touch. Something so easily killed, if Billy just closed his fist hard. Harrington had never used this tone of voice with him before – usually he just sounded annoyed with Billy, seriously annoyed, like Billy was the worst thing to have happened to him. Maybe Billy was – that seemed to be a common theme in his life.

But this voice was different. Harrington sounded at ease, relaxed, like they'd talked a thousand times. As if they'd been good friends for years.

"So what? You high as a kite?" Billy asked, mouth twitching a bit.

"I dunno. Maybe. I guess so. Maybe this would all seem a lot worse if I wasn't. But I mean what happened? To me? Nobody's said..." Harrington shifted in the bed, kicking at the too-tightly-tucked covers, until he could stick one foot out. "Everybody was looking at me like I'm nuts." He scowled down at his hands, folded loosely in his lap. Someone had moved the bed up to a half sitting position.

Billy was still hunched over, slumping, the book in one hand, and

with the other he rubbed at the back of his neck, beneath the cover of his long, golden curls.

“So...so...” He ground his teeth together, hard, molars in the back, and his eyes slid away from Harrington’s like water. “Some...asshole beat you up. Got you pretty good, I guess.”

“Shit...seriously? What’d I do?” Harrington laughed like something was funny. Billy wasn’t laughin’. “Did I at least get a few good hits in?”

Billy thought about his own aching nose, where it was bruised, where it had bled, when he’d tasted it running into his mouth.

“Dunno. Just – dunno. Dunno if he uh....meant to go after you. Like that. Hurt you that bad. But yeah. You got in a couple decent ones, Harrington.”

“Well, at least my dignity can sort of be spared – I can’t believe I’m in the hospital over that. Did I seriously lose my memory? I mean I remember – I remember other stuff. Like, my mom and dad. And my house. And school. I just...don’t remember any of those other people. I mean, I remember my birthday, and my locker number, for christ’s sake. The doctor even asked me some of that stuff, and I remember...”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Billy asked, as if he were interested.

“The last thing I...remember? Uhm...” Harrington’s brow wrinkled as he tried to think, eyes searching the ceiling for a moment, as if he’d find the answer written up there in sharpie. “I was at my pool. I was having a party with...a bunch of the guys from the basketball team, but you...you weren’t there. I dunno why.” Harrington’s brow furrowed even more.

Harrington hadn’t had any sorta pool party in a long time, according to Tommy – apparently he used to all the time before he’d started dating the Joanie bitch. Wheeler’d really neutered him after that – or at least, something had. So it had to have been, what? A couple years ago that he remembered.

"Yeah. I think that was a while back. Dunno that you throw many parties anymore. Like any. Ever. Not for a couple years, maybe." Was he supposed to tell him that?

"Wait I...you've gotta be shitting me? I mean I...I do all the time. That can't be right. You're sure?"

"I'm...pretty sure." Billy said, voice stilted.

"So I guess I...maybe I did lose it. My memory."

"How you know I'm not lyin'?"

"Because you wouldn't lie to me."

Billy was quiet at that. Felt a lot like he was lying. He didn't much like it. Harrington's face clouded over like he was trying to think about it, but then he seemed to change the subject - nodded towards the book in Billy's hands – the one he was strangling to death. Billy tried to loosen his death grip, easing up, and smoothed it out a little.

He was thinking about it. It was like Harrington was missing a few years, like a huge gap of time. But Billy was pretty sure he'd known some of the others before that – like Nancy Wheeler, and Chief Hopper – must've known them for a real long time. Why couldn't he remember them now? He could remember his parents...and some different version of Billy. One he could be 'friends' with.

"The Great Gatsby – I think we were assigned that in English, but I only watched the movie." Harrington gave him a funny look. "I... were you reading that? To me?"

Billy stared back at him, hands still on the book for once. Feeling something warm at his neck, heated from beneath his skin. The Dum-Dum was only a white stick now, which Billy clicked between his teeth, and moved to the other side of his mouth with his tongue. The paper end of it was getting sort of gross and soggy.

"Yeah. I was. Didn't think you'd actually...hear me."

"I think I did. It was like this really crazy dream, though. But well, thanks, Billy." Harrington smiled again, making this cute face,

swiping his tongue over the split in his lip once more. "It was nice – I think. I honestly don't really remember much."

Harrington never called him Billy – always called him Hargrove. This was just....it was so fucking bizarre. Billy couldn't really wrap his mind around it. Couple days ago they was taking swings at one another, and now here Harrington was calling him 'Billy' – as if they were great buds. Jesus Christ.

"Yeah, yeah...anytime." Billy said awkwardly.

Billy looked away, felt stilted and awkward and like he couldn't find his words. He suddenly just didn't know how to talk to Harrington anymore. Calling him Billy and shit, smiling at him like that – like he meant something to him– yep, Billy Hargrove was good and deep in The Twilight Zone. Maybe Billy was still drugged up from Maxine's syringe to the neck, and he was actually in some crazy acid-trip dream – like Alice in Wonderland, way too far down the rabbit hole.

Maybe none of this was real.

"Hey. Dumbass. Your mouth is all blue - can you get me one, too? The nurse was holding out on me."

Billy pulled the empty stick from his mouth, showing off his teeth at Harrington. Shoulders easing a little as he sat up straighter. The words coming easier now. "Sure. Think she's got the hots for me, keeps giving me more. What flavor you want, pretty boy?"

"You think everybody's got the hots for you. And the same. Blue raspberry - it's the best one."

5. And you'll ask yourself

Notes for the Chapter:

Day 5

"Oh my gooood mom please, I'm fine. Seriously please stop it. I promise I'm okay."

"Steven, of course you're not okay, look at you! Look at your poor face! My baby." Rita Harrington frowned down at Steve, patting her hand over his forehead, smoothing that palm over his depressingly flat hair.

He tried not to wince at the slight pressure over the ridges of stitches, even though he was pretty sure the pain meds were supposed to make him feel pretty numb. At least he wasn't fucking zonked like when he'd gotten his wisdom teeth out last year – that had been the real highlight of 8th grade, that was for sure. He'd done nothing but drink strawberry smoothies his nana made him, and watched *The Brady Bunch*, and generally not moved from the couch.

He didn't really have high hopes about smoothies, because it was his mom here – not nana – and she didn't even know how to *use* the blender, he was pretty sure. Maybe he could manage it himself, even jacked up as high as he was.

And see? He could remember having his wisdom teeth out, for crying out loud. He remembered stuff.

"And you're sure you don't remember who did this, my darling?" She asked him.

Mom was sitting at the head of the couch, in her perfectly ironed, baby blue two piece suit, with his head pulled into her lap in place of a pillow. She stared down with large, worried brown eyes that matched his own, her lower lip sticking out in a pout. Her mascara was all spidery and her eyeliner was all smudgy from crying, which wasn't exactly abnormal – she tended to cry a lot. Over a lot of things. Small things, to big things, didn't really matter.

She cried during movies, she cried during some commercials, she cried when Steve's dad didn't pay enough attention to her, or if she had to cook. She cried if she wasn't allowed to throw a dinner party, if Steve's dad had to go out of town without her. She cried if his dad said 'you're redecorating *again?*' as if he were surprised. And when she did cry, his dad would usually bend over backwards for her – even if he'd never do such a thing for Steve. If Steve cried – well, he knew what he'd be told. Boys don't cry. Men don't cry. Suck it up, buttercup.

"No, Mom – I don't. I told you a hundred times, I just don't remember. I'm sorry. It's not that bad, I don't feel that bad." Maybe it was the drugs, but hell, he didn't. Just numbish, and his mouth felt a little goofy when he talked. "I remember other stuff. It's really not a big deal. You don't have to worry so much, okay?" Christ, he felt so guilty, making her worry like this.

"Well I'm going to speak with that woman, that Joyce Byers that was at the hospital. I'm going to ask her what happened. And Chief Hopper. Oh believe me, I'll be speaking with both of them. Oh those two, I'm so terribly shocked that they're still hanging around each other – you know they were always like that in high school too."

His mom sighed, patting his chest as she looked up at the television set, a distant look on her face – it was playing one a VHS, 007 – The Spy who Loved Me. His mom loved gossip. She loved to gossip.

"Always playing hookie and smoking under the bleachers. As if that were acceptable. Like any of us are surprised now that she split up with that heathen Lonnie. He swoops right in. I cannot *believe* they made that man the chief of police."

She sighed and touched two fingers to her temple, professionally french manicured nails glistening.

"Oh dear. I'm getting a migraine."

Steve tried to get up.

She pushed him back down.

"Steven you are going to lay here for the next week, do you hear me? Until your poor face heals up a bit."

"Don't you need your migraine medicine?"

“I’m perfectly capable of getting them myself, my darling.” She huffed, adjusting one of her pearl earrings and lowered his head onto one of her million throw pillows, tugging the fur lined throw a little closer to his chin. He grumbled and pulled it back down. She pulled it back up.

“Now. Now you stay there. That’s a good boy.” She patted his shoulder a little and wandered away on her wobbling heels towards the stairs, and the full medicine cabinet in the bathroom off hers and his dad’s master bedroom two floors up.

“So where’s dad?” Steve called after her, eying the 007 movie.

She’d gotten him settled in the den downstairs by the gas fireplace – she’d flicked on the switch so that the flames danced merrily, keeping away some of the November chill. That was one of the more expensive installments in the house – a gas fireplace. You didn’t have to do a lick of work to get a roaring fire. His dad loved that.

“My sweet, he’s still in Milan. He’s sorry he couldn’t come.” She called down. “I’m going to take a small nap, and so should you!”

Steve sighed and pulled an extra one of the dozens of throw pillows over his face like he could suffocate himself. He winced, realizing it wasn’t the best course of action. He kept forgetting his face was fucking raw meat until he touched it. Damn. He threw the pillow at the wall as James Bond kept on talking, and untucked the throw from where she’d drawn it up.

“Yeah, I’m sure he’s sorry...” He mumbled to himself, huffing, as he tried to keep his toes warm – they were the closest to the fire place, where he sprawled out on the downstairs sofa. “I lose my goddamn mind or whatever and the guy still can’t be bothered.” He knew he was whining to himself. He couldn’t help it.

But typically, he still remembered his dad just fine. Grade A Asshole. Nothing had changed there, either, even with Steve missing a huge chunk of time, from what Billy and Dr. Welch had said. At least there was consistency, Steve supposed.

There was another question Steve wanted to ask, but at the same

time, didn't want to ask. If Steve's dad was still in Milan, and his mom had gotten a rush flight back from Italy, how long was she actually here for? They were adjoined at the hip, and it was never long that they were apart – unless it was one of the stretches where his dad was having an affair, and his mom would come home to pretend like everything was fine. Until he got bored of his new piece of ass.

Steve glanced at the coffee table, where his mom had put a few snacks – a pack of yogurt, and a bowl of applesauce. She seemed to be convinced he could only eat soft foods, but Steve was pretty damn sure the doctor hadn't said anything about that – and it was stuff she didn't have to cook. She wasn't exactly a 'chicken noodle soup' mom because she'd probably burn down the house if she tried to light the stove. Maybe she, too, was thinking about when Steve had had his wisdom teeth out – but that week his nana had been with him the whole time, and had been the one to supply him with a whole slew of...incredibly delicious soft foods. The kind you cooked on a real stove.

He wondered where she was – she should be here. Right? It had been a day since he'd gotten home.

Steve sighed and stretched, his head aching insistently as he rolled over onto his side, away from the glow of the television set and the heat of the fire, careful not to let the sofa cushion touch his face. He was learning, at least. As long as he didn't touch it, he was fine.

He idly thought about calling Billy – there was a phone in the den, over against the wall – they had a phone in almost every room - and this one had a blessedly long cord – he knew it reached all the way to the couch.

Billy would probably get a kick out of his mom shit talking older high school friends that had apparently been at the hospital with them. He stirred restlessly on the couch. He grabbed the pack of frozen corn his mom had brought down and placed it gently over his forehead, where it was wrapped up in a washcloth. He hissed slowly at the sensation, blowing air out through his lips in a sharp gush.

Damn. Damn this sucked.

He had never been in a fight before, and typically, he couldn't even remember it.

How stupid was that? Apparently he hadn't fared so well.

He wondered if that was part of the reason why his dad hadn't bothered to show up – just another thing that Steve wasn't good enough at. Would never be good enough at – he'd gotten his ass handed to him, really. Just an embarrassment.

Steve thought again of the phone – but – when he was actually about to get up to call him, it occurred to him that he...actually...didn't know what Billy's number was. He made a face as he tried to think – he knew his birthday, locker number, his *own* phone number, but he didn't remember Billy's. Even if he'd called it hundreds of times.

Jesus Christ this memory loss was some bullshit. It seemed like some corny plot out of a movie. This sort of thing didn't happen in real life, or it shouldn't.

"You have gotta be kidding me!" Steve exploded to himself – there was no one there to listen. He was just so *frustrated* with himself, with the whole shitshow.

He sat up suddenly, grunted as all of the blood rushed out of his head, and flopped back onto the cushions. He felt fucking awful. And his mom was probably upstairs taking a nap knocked out on her 'migraine medication' and it just fuckin' sucked.

He grabbed the Capri Sun his mom had put with the snacks, stabbing the straw into the pouch and morosely sucked on the little yellow straw, staring at the popcorn ceiling in the den.

"I can't even remember my best friend's number. This is ridiculous."

He hated it, really. He hated those empty, blank stares all of those people had given him – and like, he was supposed to know them or whatever, but he'd just drawn a goddamn blank. They sure didn't exactly seem like the normal kind of people he hung out with.

And when his mom had shown up at the hospital in a huge huff of jet lag and smeared makeup with a suitcase in tow because the cab had

left, well - he hadn't expected the extra gray in her hair. She looked older than he remembered. And wasn't that a trip?

That just seemed to solidify things even more. Like he was missing time. And it was almost...almost frightening, if he thought about it too much. For too long. Focusing on the gaping chasm, this emptiness, inside of his own mind. Like a black pit of loss.

He'd really only not felt it when he was with Billy, oddly enough – that soul sucking, drowning in a swamp kind of feeling just went away with that kick of familiarity.

With this...well he didn't know. It was just this sorta secure, safe kinda feeling. Like everything was gonna be okay, and nothing was wrong. He supposed that he sort of felt that way with his mom, but not really – not with the looming knowledge that her existence here was only temporary, probably until she was sure he wasn't gonna pass out and fall down the stairs again or something stupid like that before she flocked back to his dad overseas. Maybe she'd finally call nana. Maybe he should.

He didn't have that sinking sensation with Billy – of temporality, of the sure feeling that he was just going to go away. He didn't have to even worry about it. Knew Billy wouldn't go anywhere. But he couldn't even CALL him. It was so dumb. He tried so hard to think of the number, straining his mind, his thoughts, reaching for what he was sure must be there – just out of his reach – but all it did was make his head hurt worse, until his temples were throbbing and he sort of felt like crying, even though he refused to be a total baby.

Maybe he'd written it down. Steve groaned as he pulled himself back up to a sitting position – slower this time, so his blood pressure wouldn't make him pass out, and then got to his feet. Everything tilted really pretty, until they finally settled, and Steve wandered upstairs, his face and forehead pounding with each beat of his heart – especially along the ugly lines of stitches.

On the landing of the first floor, Steve frowned as he crossed the living room, padding over the plush carpet in socked feet, glancing once at the splotch of washed out pink over the perfect carpet – dripped all the way from the front door, to an ugly mess at the foot of

the stairs leading up to the second floor.

Looking at it made him feel sick, and he regretted looking at it – hell, he'd known it was there, he'd seen it earlier – his mom had shushed him, assuring him the maid was on the way to take care of it. It painted an ugly picture of what had happened to him – even if he couldn't remember it. Couldn't remember walking across that floor, apparently dripping what must have been blood tinted rainwater and mud. There was also an ugly orange stain on the stairs that looked suspiciously like Gatorade. It made it feel too *real*. That maybe he could have died there. Alone. It made something kick up in his chest, a foreign anxiety, and made it harder to breathe. Even so, after surviving it, he was surprised his mom hadn't murdered him.

He hurried after that, skirting by the spot by the stairs, averting his eyes as he headed straight for the kitchen. The big cork-board was by the phone, with little sticky notes and push pins, all neat and orderly with a calendar nearby – marking when his parents would be out of town.

There were little X's all the way through the month of November – indicating they would have been overseas, or wherever, for at least the next month. His mom was never supposed to have come home. Steve's mind skipped back to the spot by the stairs, where he must have lain – but his parents hadn't been here. So who'd found him? How had they found him? Why had they been there? Shit. He wished he remembered. But he also didn't want to think about it too closely. He could have lain there for what – days? Or until whenever the maid showed up? Probably eaten by coyotes or something.

Steve turned his attention to the stickies – with numbers scrawled over them in his own chicken scratch handwriting, only a few in his mother's neat cursive. Steve chewed on his lower lip as he examined the numbers written there – there were a lot of names he didn't recognize.

Dustin – Joyce – 'Hop' was circled in red sharpie, like it was important. He thought his mom had said those names, Joyce and Hop – 'Hopper' – earlier, but Steve couldn't attach faces to names. There were other names, too. Nancy. Max. Whoever they were. The name 'Tommy' was crossed out several times, but the paper hadn't been

removed from the board.

But no Billy.

Billy's number wasn't to be found on the board.

Probably because he'd had it memorized, he supposed. He hadn't needed to write it down.

Steve grumbled under his breath. He pulled the heavy phone book out from the drawer beneath the kitchen counter where the board was – slapping it down on the marble counter top with a ‘thud’ and started to flick through the white pages. Hargrove. The doctor had mentioned Billy's last name was Hargrove. There. Steve's fingertip trailed down the lists of names, sorting by the surname ‘H’, until he came across a Hargrove, Neil. That was the only Hargrove on the list.

“Bingo.” Steve muttered, and grabbed the phone off of the hook, tucking it between his ear and shoulder as he dialed the number on the pad, tongue between his teeth.

It rang three times before somebody picked up. “Hello?” A woman said.

Steve cleared his throat. Shit. He'd been hoping it would be Billy that would answer.

“Ah, hi . Is Billy there? Billy Hargrove?” Steve asked, hoping he had the right number. He glanced back down at the number in the phone book to double check.

“Billy? Oh yes, Billy is here! Well this is a pleasant surprise, usually we don't get many callers for him. Are you a friend?” She sounded like she had a smile in her voice.

Steve's brow crinkled with confusion – they didn't? Surely Steve called him? Right? If this was somebody that lived with Billy, shouldn't they know Steve?

“Yes ma'am, this is Steve, Steve Harrington, I – “ Steve started, but there was a scuffling sound over the line, and a crackle as the phone was moved around.

“Here, I've got it, Susan – “ Steve recognized Billy's voice in the

background.

“Oh, alright, dear – here you go.” The woman said, and handed over the phone to someone else.

“Hello?” Billy asked from the other end, sounding kind of breathless. That rough, familiar voice, pitched low.

“Hey, it’s me.” Steve smiled, leaning his hip against the kitchen counter, folding his arms across his chest – phone balanced against his ear.

He gazed out the kitchen window over the sink – where he could watch the rain drip down from the gutters. It hadn’t stopped raining for about a week, apparently. The sound of it on the roof made his head hurt.

There was a brief, awkward silence, then Billy said. “Hey man.” There was a sigh of movement, and then the thud of a door shutting. Like Billy had moved into another room. “Why uh. Why are you calling?” He asked. His voice was almost a whisper, with a line of tension running through it. It was weird.

“I dunno – just to see what you were up to, I guess. Jesus, it’s only been a day since I got back home and my mom won’t get off of my ass.” Steve sighed into the line. “Just thought it might be a good time to call.” He shifted against the counter, arms tightening a bit over his chest, before he dropped one hand to grip the edge of the marble – feeling it bite into his palm. “Should I...not have?”

“Well I – we don’t usually talk. Over the phone. My d – it’s a long story. But I guess I can talk for a little.”

“Are you sure? You sound like you’re whispering.”

“It’s prolly the connection. Look, you wanna talk or what, Harrington?”

“Yeah, I do – as long as you’re sure it’s okay. Sorry, I guess I...forgot that we don’t really talk on the phone. We can always just talk at school or whatever, but I dunno if I’ll be there for a few days.”

"Naw. It's fine, I've got a few. And at least they're giving you a few free days to play hookie. And what? Your mom being a bitch?"

"No, no, not a bitch, really. Just – hanging all over me and won't leave me alone."

"Yeah, that sounds like a real hardship." Billy's voice came across dry. "She raised some holy hell at the hospital."

Steve couldn't really decide if he hated it or if he secretly kind of liked the attention. She could just be kind of suffocating about it. It just didn't feel normal. With her, her love was either all at once, too much, or she was completely absent. It made it difficult to adjust to the wild difference, depending on her mood. It was like...like he didn't know how to *deal* with her attention for him. Didn't know what to do. Especially because he knew she'd just disappear. He didn't want to get used to it. And she...she hadn't been there. He must have needed her, that night, and she...she hadn't been there. It was easy to act like she cared *now*.

"Yeah, she really did. And I mean it's not bad, I guess she's trying to show she cares or whatever, just...in her own way. But she keeps going on about how I almost died and just. I just don't really wanna think about it, you know?"

There was another silence, longer this time. "Yeah, yeah I know what you mean." Billy agreed. "Speaking of, your head doing better, or?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I'm on some kind of horse pills and they make me feel pretty okay, so it's hard to tell. What are you up to?"

"Just...the normal. Y'know.." He had no idea why Billy sounded so awkward. Like they'd never just talked like this before. "Maxine is stuffing her face on Halloween candy and watching Romancing the Stone with Susan and it's a total chickfest in there."

Steve's eyes flicked up to the board – it slowly registered that the sticky note with 'Max' written on it in his own handwriting was the same number he'd called. Billy's number.

"Max?" Steve asked.

“Yeah, my little s- step, sister. Little red head you prolly saw at the hospital? Her. Susan’s her ma.”

“Yeah, okay yeah I remember her. I think.” Steve winced a little – the written word ‘max’ glaring at him. He’d written that himself. He DID know her. He must know all of these other people on the board too. Were they more people that had been at the hospital? Like ‘Joyce?’ “I’ve just uh, been having some trouble – y’know – just keeping everybody straight.”

“s alright, man, I don’t give a shit. I’ll tell you who they are.” Billy said, his voice sounding subdued. Like he was deep in thought. “Just...tell me if you don’t remember. And I’ll tell you.”

“My own personal Encyclopedia, huh? Billy Hargrove.” Steve grinned.

“That’s me. Billy ‘Britannica’ Hargrove.”

“Well, Britannica, what’s Romancing the Stone? Sounds like a bad porno.”

“s some rom com that came out last spring. You’re not that far off. Some writer bitch goes to South America. Gets some dick. Kinda like a lady Indiana Jones, for chicks. I dunno, they’re watching it, not me.”

“Are you sure you’re not watching it with them?” Steve laughed.

Steve could almost sense a blush through the phone. “Shuddup.”

“You ARE watching it with them. I knew it.”

“Someone has to help Maxine finish the Halloween candy. The movie just happens to be on.”

“Is that code for you’re stealing it?”

“I’d call it ‘liberating.’”

“Save me some Hershey’s.”

“Yeah, alright. I will. Look, Harrington, I gotta go.” Billy said suddenly. “When you gonna be back in school?”

“I think in about a week. My mom wants me to like go into hibernation until then or something, so. She’s got me stuffed down in the den, and I’m pretty sure I might turn into a vampire. OH and somebody is supposed to still be bringing me my homework too, which is total bullshit.”

“Try drinking some holy water to ward it off. An’ you fuckin’ kidding me? Those assholes are still sending you homework?”

“Yeah, my mom talked to the school. They said they don’t want me to fall behind for senior year, apparently I wasn’t doing so hot or whatever already. But they’re going to make an ‘exception’ for me for the semester because they ‘understand the situation.’ Whatever that means. Jeez, I can’t believe it’s already senior year...that’s just...it’s insane.”

“The hell does that mean, an exception? They get you’re missing the last two years upstairs, right? That counts for schoolwork, too? Yeah?”

Steve cleared his throat, closing his eyes. Christ he just didn’t want to think about this, talk about it. He’d wanted to forget. For a second, Romancing the Stone, he’d been able to.

“I don’t really know. I haven’t looked at any of my books or anything. It seems kind of hit and miss, what’s there and what’s not.”

“Yeah, well I - Shit, I – really do gotta go. I’ll see you at school, Harrington.”

The line went dead. Steve pulled the baby blue phone away from his ear, blinking down at it with a frown at the abrupt disconnect. Well that had been sudden. And why did Billy keep on calling him Harrington?

6. Where is my mind

Summary for the Chapter:

Day 6 - 8

Billy rung the doorbell. He rung it again. Rung it again. And again. Again. Jesus Harrington was so goddamn SLOW, shit, hurry the fuck up! Ding! Ding! Ding! Billy took another long drag from his Marlboro, balancing it between his teeth, glaring at the door like if he stared hard enough it might melt, or you know, Harrington might actually miraculously make an appearance. DING!

The door swung open.

“Jesus okay! I’m here! Oh. Hey.”

Steve had swung the door open, all disgruntled looking, and his face still looked tender – but the vicious black was starting to turn more mottled, wine red and plum purple, the scabbing angry and molting as it started to peel. Billy stared at him for a second, letting the cig burn away from its perch between his lips.

He’d been all pissy looking at first, but the second he saw who it was, Harrington’s entire scarred expression melted into a relaxed kind of delight, even if Billy was pretty sure those dark does eyes looking directly into his. Billy never had nobody look at him like that when he showed up, unless they were cheering him on at a party as he chugged straight vodka, or lapped up belly shots out of a girl’s belly button as she eagle spread out on a table.

Harrington had been the prettiest boy Billy thought maybe he had ever seen – and coming from California, there were a LOT of pretty boys. On the beach, blading along sidewalks, or stretched across the sand. All golden, with sunkissed skin and sunbleached hair and sundarkened freckles, all more than HAPPY to show it off to any appraising onlooker really.

But here Billy was in this snow caked hellhole, where he’d had to stamp his boots all the way up Harrington’s slippery iced over bitch

of a driveway just to keep his toes from freezing and falling off. Hawkins, where snowbunnies hibernated over the winter instead of flying south, and dagger-like icicles hung from the eaves of Harrington's estate like he was in Alaska or something. All of the rain from the past week had started to freeze, and it was nothing but nice now. That had been a fun surprise.

So yeah, yeah Billy was here, where the sun rarely showed her face, and even when she did, it was still fucking cold as balls, and he found this – this ivory skinned *hottie*, with natural beauty marks that didn't need the sun to bring them out, and the biggest, darkest eyes Billy had ever seen – the opposite of the west coast view off the highway, sunlight glinting off water – no, those eyes were...Billy didn't know.

They were the dark and damp of the earth in a way that he'd only really experienced when he got out here to the middle of fucking nowhere farmland – even the SOIL here was different. Back home, it was light, sandy, best for growing cacti, dry and prickly shit – but here, it was rich and full of moisture, best for growing heavy vegetation and 'food of the earth' kinda shit. And Harrington, his eyes, his eyes looked a lot like that. Dark. Full of LIFE.

And Billy had tried to beat that shit out of him.

So he didn't have to *look* at it anymore.

So he didn't have to *see* how pretty he was, maybe.
Or at least, that was a part of it.

It had been more than that, though, Billy knew. It was also a wrong place, wrong time kinda thing – there had been so many things...too many things...building up on his shoulders. Weighing him down until he couldn't walk with it anymore, dragging his feet, and no matter how much he worked out, no matter how much he packed on the muscle, he just...couldn't...shoulder it anymore.

And it all came to a head the minute Harrington opened his mouth and LIED to him. He was transported to having his back shoved up against the bookshelf as he shoved SINCLAIR up against a bookshelf instead, and then Harrington had to get up on his high and mighty horse and push him, push him, push him, and throw the first punch.

Nobody fucking TOLD Billy what to do. Nobody but his pops. And Billy...you know, for once, Billy hadn't started that fight. And Billy, he'd started a LOT of fights.

He may not have started it, but he sure as hell had finished it – even more so if Maxine hadn't knocked him the fuck out.

That night was a convoluted mess in Billy's mind.

Honestly, once he'd started wailing on Harrington, he only remembered bits and pieces – which he partially blamed on the cocktail of drugs Maxine had shot him up with. Or maybe he was just blocking it out.

It was just some warped mess of, of his dad, his back hitting the bookshelf, making Sinclair's back hit another bookshelf, too, then that pretty, pretty face, and the way his dad called him 'faggot.' And that maybe if Billy didn't have to see that gorgeous face no more, Billy's dad wouldn't SEE the queer shit leaking out of Billy's goddamn ears, and if he couldn't lift a hand against his dad, he could against someone else...but....but he didn't *want* to be his dad.

He hadn't *wanted* that night. He didn't know himself that night. He didn't want to. He'd just. Snapped.

And looking at Harrington's face...looking at the stitches that marched across his forehead, along his scalp, like railroad tracks... Billy couldn't help but be grateful Maxine had the sense to stop him.

Because he'd fucking lost it. He knew it. He'd had someone else beneath him, crashing down into his face like wave after wave on the Cali coast, and he didn't know, didn't know who that person WAS – was it him? Was it because he was such a faggot? Was he just trying to beat the shit out of his dad? Was it something that maybe, in another world, another life, maybe he could actually lift a hand back against his pops?

He didn't know. He wasn't some voodoo psychologist.

But he did know that he had beat the pretty right out of King Steve.

The result stood in front of him.

So now he didn't have to look at 'pretty' anymore. Not in the conventional sense. Instead he looked tender and swollen, scabbed over and bruised – in a way that Billy had been familiar with before, just looking in a mirror. So what, this was just like he'd wanted.

Right?

He was turning into his fucking father. Turning into that man. Couldn't fight your DNA.

Billy swallowed a tight lump in his throat. Now look at the mess they were in. Billy was standing on the front porch of Harrington's goddamn mansion or whatever, where he felt like fuckin' Alfred was gonna answer the door in a penguin suit instead of Harrington.

His arms full of books – like ACTUAL textbooks. He normally wouldn't be caught dead carrying around this shit, with even a few more in the backpack hanging from his other hand because he refused to actually WEAR it. It'd throw off his look.

Harrington stared at him in something like bemusement, those sweet dark eyes flicking from the books in one arm to the backpack hanging from the other, then up to Billy's eyes. Harrington looked a little wobbly, standing there, holding onto the door a little too hard. Looked like a newborn fawn that was about to fall on weak knees. He winced into the sunlight beyond and rather shied away from it, turning his head, eyes squinting shut.

"Uh. Got some studying to do?" Steve frowned away from the sun, backing away from it like a vampire. Billy guessed he hadn't been kidding on the phone.

"No asshole, you do. You inviting me in or what, or y' just gonna stand there looking pretty? It's twenty below fucking zero." Billy scowled at him, talking around the cigarette in his mouth because he couldn't actually move it.

He blew smoke out of his nostrils like a ticked off bull in a cartoon – or maybe it was just his breath condensing from the SUB ZERO TEMPERATURES BECAUSE FUCK INDIANA.

"You say that like I don't look like a train ran over my face. Yeah, yeah sorry c'mon in – you need help with that?"

Yeah. If the train was Billy. Sure.

Steve reached his arms out to help take the book bag from Billy, giving Billy the chance to slip the smoke from his mouth to the porch, crushing it beneath the toe of his boot, twisting it out. Steve glanced at it once before he lugged the backpack inside, followed by Billy.

"I can't believe it's November and you're still wearing nothing but that jacket. You need a real winter jacket, you know – if you think it's cold now, it's just gonna get worse as we get into December. January's also a real bitch." Steve wobbled faintly as he headed towards the living room couch, toting the bag full of books.

Billy regretted letting him hold it now, dammit. Look at him. He looked ready to fall over. And it was all one Billy Hargrove's fault. Billy scowled, starting to follow after him.

"This jacket is real enough."

Billy grumbled - he'd already had this fight with his step mom.

"Oh shit, remember, my mom's home – so don't forget the boots." Steve called back to him.

Billy froze, glancing down at where shoes were gathered in a neat row by the front door – definitely not something he'd been aware of, obviously. Though he was tempted to just ignore it, because *fuck* rules, he kicked his boots off, toeing them off at the heels. Finally, he followed Steve into the main room, tossing the pile of books onto the glass coffee table unceremoniously.

As he walked over in socked feet, Billy noted a large, angry red splotch of...red. Close to the stairs. Like an old stain, but it was in a trail all the way from the entryway by the lamp. Billy tracked the trail of brown and red all the way. His mouth flinched. Thought of the way Joanie had said, if nobody had found Harrington - was that where it happened. He swallowed down something jagged in his

throat - didn't want to fucking know.

"Well Jesus." Steve glanced down at the coffee table with a wry smile, before glancing up at Billy, the corners of his eyes crinkling just so – darkened with the beating Billy gave him. "I knew they were sending somebody with my homework, but not YOU. What the hell are we even studying? This is like...the entire library."

Billy glanced up sharply, drawn from his reveries of blood on his fists. Harrington was giving him a funny look. Billy wasn't about to opt up the information that after Steve told him on the phone about the homework thing, he'd hunted down the total nerd who'd been selected for the job and basically 'relieved' them of the assignments and materials. Or that this amount of books, the notes, all of it, was probably overkill.

But he'd taken everything they gave the kid. And Billy didn't half ass anything. Ever. And if he was going to be helping Steve after Billy fucked up his brain or whatever, well. He wasn't gonna half ass that shit, either.

"Yeah well, it's a lot – but finals are in about a month, and if you don't remember this shit, you're fucked. So here I am. You gotta problem with that, Harrington?" Billy's lip curled up a little sharply, but all Harrington did was LAUGH at him.

"Oh yeah, *such* a big problem. No man, I just feel bad you had to lug all this stuff here...I mean thanks." Harrington lay down real ginger-like onto the couch, raising a hand to his head, like maybe it hurt him, looking down at the scattered text books and the couple of notebooks from the backpack with a disheartened expression.

He was squinting a little, a tiny line of concentration between his brows. Making a pout with those perfect, cupid's bow lips of his. "I dunno where to start. That's all. Y'know I'm not really into all of that studying, so much."

There was a rustling sound from upstairs.

"Steven darling, who is it? I told you to rest in the den, young man. You don't need to be answering the door." A lady called down.

"It's just Billy, mom. And it's fine, I had it." Steve called back up.

A familiar brunette haired lady with the same, big dark eyes as Harrington stuck her head over the banister up above – she was putting in a pearl earring, frowning. Her hair looked a little like a beehive on top of her head, fixed in place with even more hairspray than Harrington himself.

"Who?"

"Billy! Y'know, Billy." Steve gestured vaguely at her, and then he was tugging one of the text books into his lap, flipping idly through the pages.

"No, I don't – " Those searching brown eyes, familiar eyes, latched onto Billy from up above.

Billy stared up at her, sitting on the couch across from Steve – two matched prissy white couches that faced one another. He felt like he was in a museum or something. Their words actually ECHOED a little, calling back and forth to one another. He gave a sarcastic little wave, knees spread wide, throwing on his most charming smile.

"From the hospital." Billy purred up at her. "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Harrington."

Steve gave him this big grossed out look from where his mom couldn't see at Billy's flirtatious smile.

They hadn't told her, at the hospital, 'who'd dunnit.' She didn't know, about the game, this ridiculous *game* that they were playing. It was good Billy liked games. He was good at them.

She didn't know who had beat the living shit out of her son, although he was sitting pretty on the sofa in her living room right now. He was the one she'd hissed about wanting to 'persecute him to the full extents of the law' as she'd put it while Steve'd been unconscious. But apparently, because Steve was over eighteen, the doc didn't have to offer up much to her, and it seemed like the Chief seemed to want to keep it that way from what Billy'd eavesdropped. Which Billy found...interesting.

“Oh. Billy. Of course?” Mrs. Harrington looked a little confused, but nodded.

“He brought me that homework from school.”

“Well...you two let me know if you need anything.” She disappeared, still fiddling with her earrings. “Steven I want you to stay resting in the den while you do your homework. Please don’t dirty up the sitting room. And don’t push yourself too hard!”

“Yeah alright, ma.” Steve called, starting to gather up the books with Billy.

They ended up in the den, Steve’s apparent prison for the week. Steve had the television on, switched to MTV, which Billy could honestly appreciate.

Billy felt awkward as shit, however – ‘cause he had no idea what he was doing. But he just kind of barreled forward like he usually did with pretty much everything, starting with the syllabi from the classes that the teachers had provided and the homework lists, with bundles of papers that he’d shoved into the ratty old backpack.

It was going to take FOREVER. Turned out forever wasn’t so long, though.

Because it turned out that Steve was still having trouble focusing, LITERALLY, like focusing his eyes. The doc had mentioned something about that, from the concussion, might last a couple days. Billy could even SEE the way he went a little cross eyed with one of the open text books in his lap, knees up, laying back against some fancy ass throw pillows.

He got frustrated fast, pinching at the bridge of his nose like it could make the headache he was complaining about go away. And maybe it was a lot of things – headache, focusing his eyes, and this was honestly...a lot of shit that he had to play catch up on.

Even Billy could admit that, and from what Billy’d heard, apparently Steve hadn’t done so hot in school before now, either.

How was he supposed to learn all this before finals next month?

Billy had the books, and he had a few of his spiral notebooks with his own cramped handwriting from the start of the semester onwards. He had the homework assignments due.

Steve slapped the worn out old textbook shut with a snap, eyes closing as he tilted his head back against the pillows – the line of his throat exposed as he gulped, adams apple bobbing.

“This is fucking impossible.” Steve groaned.

Billy frowned, shifting on the end of the couch where he sat with the notebook that he’d been relaying his notes with what Steve was supposed to be reading. Going over it all with him.

This wasn’t working. This wasn’t working at all.

Billy sighed and reached over to move the book out of Steve’s hands, pushing it over onto the coffee table in the den. Steve wasn’t looking at him – was looking away, over at the other side of the room, a distant look on his face, chin jutting out in this stubborn way.

Thumb over his mouth, like maybe he was nervous.

Maybe Billy didn’t blame him.

“Alright. Alright, it’s fine.” Billy sighed, flipping the pages back through his notebook. “We’ll start over. We don’t need those books. I remember it all, at least from this semester, and that’s all of the important stuff for finals anyway. I still have all my notes. We can just go over those instead, and that way you don’t have to look at nothin’.”

Steve’s dark eyes, dark like the soil, like the earth Billy had thought of, flitted back to him, lashes fluttering in something like confusion.

“You just...remember it? Just like that?”

Billy nodded. “Yep.”

“But isn’t that...I dunno. Obnoxious? For you to have to parrot all of it back to me?”

Billy thought of Harrington’s still body on that hospital bed. He thought of the way Steve’s eyes seemed to slide out of focus when he

was trying to concentrate on the book pages. He thought of the way he'd felt Steve's face actually *crack* beneath his knuckles, and the real culprit, the vibration in his wrist as the plate cracked down – because Billy didn't fight fair. He never did. He thought of the way his stomach had dropped, how he'd been doused under this bucket of ice water for days that felt like years, frozen with dread and guilt.

He couldn't have said why he'd trash-canned that stupid nerd with the pocket protector, and stolen all this shit for Harrington to come himself, without anyone being the wiser. Couldn't have really articulated it. But he had the feeling that it had to do with this... nameless...something, just beneath his breastbone, that just told him he needed to do SOMETHING. Something. So he was here. As a 'friend.' Even if only Harrington could call him that. And he had brain damage.

"No. No it's not." Billy gave Harrington a cracked out smile, feeling a little giddy, a little like he was losing his goddamn mind. Jesus fucking christ. "What're best friends for?"

Billy's voice rumbled out, all low tones and gravel, as he reiterated his own notes to Steve, then elaborating on them; what he remembered, what he knew, trying to explain the concepts and ideas to Steve until they could begin to make sense. Notes from bio, all photosynthesis and cell walls, notes from algebra, all equations and variables. They shared most of their classes aside from English, 'cause they'd stuck Billy in some 'advanced' class that he really didn't need.

Billy was half rambling on to Harrington, half chewing on the eraser end of his yellow #2 pencil. His knee was bouncing and he couldn't stop it, toe tapping, with the low undercurrent of MTV music video jams burbling beneath his voice.

Harrington's eyes were either locked on him, head tilted a little, like an attentive puppy, or drifting somewhere around the ceiling. Sometimes they closed, all dark lashes as he listened, brow furrowed in concentration – nodding idly as he tried to understand. Sometimes scribbling something down in a spiral notebook.

Billy thought it was fucking NUTS that the school was making Harrington catch up on homework considering he'd just gotten out of

the goddamn hospital.

But then again, who was he to talk? Billy was the one that had put him there.

But Billy learned quickly that Harrington seemed to understand the content faster and better when Billy was reading it out loud, or explaining it to him, audibly, compared to when he was actually trying to read it on paper or in the book.

“It’s like when you read to me in the hospital.” Steve commented idly at one point, a soft smile curling at the edge of his mouth – a brown lock furling over his forehead as he titled his chin down, knees pulled up enough for Billy to sit near his feet.

Mrs. Harrington kept coming down at random times. First she brought sodas down. Then she brought yogurts.

Eventually, she came down to shoo Billy out because Steve was looking too tired, ‘poor baby.’

Billy left all of his notebooks and papers behind.

Steve had fallen asleep trying to review some of the papers that Billy had left behind, running a fingertip over the tiny, cramped, neat handwriting on the college lined papers. Billy pressed the pencil lead in hard enough to leave indentations on the paper, like hieroglyphics carved in stone. He wished he could read it better – it seemed to just swim in his vision when he tried to focus on anything up close. Something he’d been warned about from the concussion – side effects. How had he forgotten that Billy was so *smart*?

He’d just been so tired – mentally exhausted, and physically, too. They’d been studying for a few days now, with Billy showing up some time after school, after he said he’s already dropped his sister ‘Max’ off at his house. Well, that was, if you could call all of it

studying. Steve was able to lure him into just bullshitting for a while if he really tried, or watching a movie on the VCR, because Steve was still on den-arrest.

He wasn't even allowed to go upstairs to the second floor, in case he might lose his balance and fall with his fucked up equilibrium. Steve didn't entirely see what the difference was between that and using the stairs to go down into the den, but that was his mom's logic for you. That was a big clue, now, that Steve was dreaming. At least...at least he thought he was dreaming.

That's probably what it was, because he definitely was NOT in the den. He recognized his room as the room that he'd come home to from the hospital, before he'd been banished to staying in the den after he almost biffed it on the way back downstairs.

It was the room that his mom had probably redecorated sometime between when he could remember, and when he couldn't, because now it looked like plaid had thrown up everywhere. As in EVERYWHERE. The wallpaper, the comforter, no place was spared. PILLOWS. Plaid pillows. The only thing left he really recognized was the framed red hot rod that he'd had since he was a kid.

And there was also the very noticeable fact that in the dream, Steve was definitely having sex. He liked to think it was probably a memory. He'd definitely brought girls up to his room before, usually after a party, luring them up with a charming smile, and hell, he had a lot of parties – but he didn't really remember it when his room was so *plaid*, all greenish and sharp white angled lines, with that geometric comforter. He was pressing hands into sheets, fingers curled together, intertwined, but everything in the dream felt fluid – felt *not real*, and if it wasn't for that, Steve would have almost thought that it was a memory.

Someone's body was arching beneath the long line of his own, rib cage butting against his, matching up, breath coming fast – just like Steve's. Everything was shadowed, hazed, and the window was open, and it was cold – and something like steam was drifting in from the window, the kind that Steve had seen hovering lazily over the pool in fall-time when it started to cool down at night.

It made everything in his room dreamy, surreal, intangible – sensual in a way he could not grasp, but also oddly frightening, and he didn't understand. Soft breathy sounds were gasped beneath him, and he was swallowing them up, drinking each broken vowel, each sigh of his name upon their lips, and his hands were wrapped up in hair, coiled in sheets. Steve was surrounded by heat and softness, but they were a mystery – even as he rolled his body. Rolling hips and rolling shoulder blades and smiling into kisses pressed against the jutting tendons of a thrown back throat – tasting a pulse there

. Steve pulled away, opened his eyes, looking, looking, for who it was, and caught a glimpse of blue eyes – blue eyes, and then the bluest eyes.

And then Steve was suddenly the one on his back – the one *being* straddled, not the other way around – and the environment had changed, sharp and confused and far too bright and those blue eyes were *above* him, and Steve KNEW those eyes and –

Steve sat up fast, legs tangled in the sheets, arms grappling – either to push someone away, or to pull them closer, he wasn't sure. He tumbled out of bed as he tried to stand, unceremonious and half naked in tented boxer briefs. He hit the carpet hard. Fucking plaid.

Steve groaned and twisted onto his back, bracing an elbow beneath him, still breathing hard from the cobwebs of dreams still hanging around him. His head pounded insistently, angry with him, and he knew he probably needed to get more of the pain pills. Everything swam in front of his eyes, a dark haze, a blur, which had been a fun thing that had been happening since he'd woken up in the hospital.

Blue eyes, blue eyes, he blinked hard and stared down at the evidence of his own boner, rigid against his upper thigh where it was held back by cotton, damp with pre-come.

Shit. What was he, thirteen?

Steve slumped up against the nightstand next to his desk, reaching up blindly to click on the red desk lamp, trying to rub the sleep from his eyes, and not grab himself outright in wake of it. What the fuck had that been?

Steve felt like he'd glued some firecrackers to his temples and set them off. Sharp, stabbing, insistent pain pulsed there. He was already going soft, just from that. He knew his brain was sort of like scrambled eggs right now or whatever, but – but – he didn't...know...what to make of that dream.

Or why the dream had changed so suddenly, or why the only thing he had been able to identify was BLUE, and all that he could admit was that those were blue eyes that he knew, he knew them, and that felt more like a memory than a dream, half recalled and muddled in that sort of dreamscape. Steve pushed his hands against his face, like he was trying to blur the image that was buried beneath his eyelids, imprinted there like a still-life.

He – Billy. Billy was his best friend, Steve was rather sure. Right? They were best friends.

At least, that was the one thing that Steve had been sure of when he'd woken up, as strange and *unreal* as everything else in his life had seemed to be. Billy had blue eyes. Billy had blue eyes like that. But he hadn't...things weren't like that with Billy.

Not...not boy friends. Best friends.

But what did Steve know anymore? Nothing.

And Billy HAD been acting strangely with him. Almost like he didn't know how to act, or what was going on. He acted...stiff. Unsure of himself, which didn't seem correct at all. And maybe it would be weird if someone you were...*with*, woke up from a coma, and suddenly thought you were best friends.

And sometimes, Steve supposed, you know...you know, friendships could develop like that, though Steve thought it must normally be with friendships of the opposite sexes. But things happened.

And Steve, Steve didn't even KNOW himself anymore, and according to apparently everybody he was missing about a two year time gap, roughly.

So who was to say he hadn't discovered some other things about himself during that time that he simply didn't remember? And that

was why Billy was acting so strangely, because...?

Steve felt a blush creeping up his neck as he tried to will down the heat in his stomach, the hardness in his briefs, but he couldn't get rid of that image, that memory, of someone else in his bed with him and how perfectly at peace he had been. He hadn't known he could feel like that.

He'd never felt like he'd felt in his dream like he had screwing any girl.

Steve bit his lower lip and stared at the ceiling, lit only vaguely by the shitty desk lamp.

It had been days since he'd gotten home. This was the first dream he'd remembered. All of the other nights, he had also dreamed, but all of them had been nightmares.

Nightmares that he could never remember when he woke up, he only knew that when he woke up, he was sweating, cold with it, freezing with it, shaking like he was outside in the middle of an Indiana January without a coat. He'd even screamed himself awake a few times, only to be woken up by his very startled, and rather concerned looking mother, Rita's brunette locks all sleep mussed, her matching dark brown eyes huge in her skull – dark in the night as she gripped his shoulders.

Jesus he was glad she hadn't come into his room to wake him up from *this* dream.

Steve furled forward, drawing his legs up to wrap his arms around them, pressing his forehead into the twin bumps of his knees – thinking about very unsexy things to try and not be hard, not be hard for Billy, for his best friend, because what if it was a dream, it couldn't have been real, he thought. His mind was only playing tricks on him, though WHY it was supplying that particular scenario --he had no idea.

Like seriously no idea.

A soft voice in the back of his mind whispered to him, whispered that

the only reason was because it must be one of those suppressed memories Dr. Whelch had been talking about.

That it could totally, definitely be very real. Or it could be a different memory, and his brain was filling in gaps.

Steve was half tempted to just relieve himself, he knew he probably still had a bottle of lube somewhere in one of his drawers or at the very least some lotion or something of he still kept it in the same place as before. But he didn't really know that he wanted to get off to a half concocted (memory?) dream about his best friend.

He already wasn't sure if he could look Billy in the eye the next day, and if he was wiping the memory off with a tissue tonight, he DEFINITELY wouldn't be able to do it.

A dream wasn't his fault – his mind supplying the hard curve and tone of biceps, the flat plane of a well muscled stomach, the sharper jut of a man's squared off hips...and those eyes like what Steve thought the California ocean must be like...but if he made an active choice to rub one out...that was on him. If Steve thought about it hard enough, he knew that he knew Billy's scent.

As if they'd been in very close quarters before, close enough for Steve to smell it, all cheap cologne and spice and after shave, Aquanet hairspray and the very distinct tinge of sweat and heady pheromones – like you were playing a sport, or...or having sex.

It couldn't be REAL. Could it?

Even if Steve knew the scent of him?

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you again you wonderful human being @pan-shego for beta reading this for me <3 I appreciate you, boo

Author's Note:

Thanks for reading this crack guys! I'm @lemonlovely on Tumblr <3